

(A/N: This story represents my favorite kind of AU, a "what-if" story: I tweak one element of the Potterverse and then watch the new dominoes fall. It was originally published on Portkey, under my pen-name of Paracelsus.

My thanks to my beta for this story, MirielleGrey, who so needed Yet One More Hobby. And ten points to anyone who spots the tie-in from The Incredibles.)

(Disclaimer: I should hope the fact that I'm discarding the Epilogue in favor of my own interpretation should convince you that I'm not Jo Rowling. If it doesn't, maybe the emptiness of my bank account will.)

"Coming Back Late"

by alchymie

I: How It Ended

"Of course it is happening inside your head, Harry, but why on earth should that mean that it is not real?"

Dumbledore's closing words continued to ring in Harry's ears – well, Harry's mind – as the vision of King's Cross faded from view. Harry would be returning to his body now, that having been his choice: he would awaken in the clearing, in the very midst of Voldemort and his Death Eaters. That meant he'd have to continue to play dead, he knew, until he had the chance to kill Nagini... then, and only then, would he be able to confront Voldemort for the final time.

But he couldn't feel his body.

Harry tried wiggling a toe (surely that would go unnoticed by his enemies, since he was wearing shoes). Nothing happened. He couldn't seem to remember how to wiggle. In fact, he didn't feel like he had a body at all. He felt like a breath of air, or a cloud, light and floating, and not located in any one spot.

Gradually, he began to see his surroundings. He got the impression of looking down at the clearing: there was his body lying limp, there were the Death Eaters, there was Voldemort being helped to his feet by Bellatrix Lestrange. Interesting, that... it looked as though Voldemort had fallen when Harry had been killed. Dumbledore had been right again: Voldemort's use of Harry's blood had linked them together even more firmly. Harry could see all of this, but not through his eyes: he saw from on high, as a disembodied spirit.

Oh, I get it now. I'm having one of those Out-of-Body Experiences that Aunt Petunia's bridge club used to talk about. Erm, maybe Trelawney said something about them, too – I wasn't paying attention. All right, fine, an Out-of-Body Experience. Can I please get back to having an In-Body Experience now?

But Harry's point of view didn't change. He continued to watch from above as events unfolded. He couldn't hear any words, but he watched as Voldemort cast a few Cruciatus Curses at his body. Then Hagrid was forced to pick up Harry's body and carry it out of the clearing, with Voldemort and the Death Eaters close behind.

Hey! That's my body! Hagrid, stop! I'm not really dead, Hagrid, don't cry, but I need my body back!

The last of the Death Eaters had left now, and still Harry's consciousness was suspended over the clearing. He tried to follow, so that he could reanimate his body in Hagrid's arms... but he had no experience with disembodyment. He didn't know how to move, or what to do – he was totally disoriented. But he had to get back to his body!

One possibility came to mind. Desperately, he cast his sight around the clearing again, seeking a glint of metal... There! There it is. Let's hope this works...

There it was indeed, the ring with the Resurrection Stone, lying where he'd dropped it. Harry had to assume that he was still its master, that it would respond to him as though he were alive – and simultaneously, that it could affect him as though he were dead. In his current twilight state, after all, both might be true.

He focused on his sight of the ring, tried to imagine what it had felt like on his finger... recalled the feeling when he'd summoned Sirius, Remus and his parents...

And Harry opened his eyes. Which was a wonderful thing! He had eyes again!

But then, why was he seeing the clearing in black and white?

He looked down at himself. His form was more than a ghost, but less than a person... yet it was real enough to allow himself to act like he had a body again. He could move his head, stretch his hands in front of him (he noted that the Resurrection ring was now on his finger – it felt very, very heavy to his semicorporeal self). Most important, he could walk... he could go after Voldemort. He immediately set out, realizing after a few steps that he was heading back to Hogwarts.

It was slow going. The ring weighed him down, so that it was a struggle to keep it on his finger – yet he had to keep it, to maintain even this semblance of a body. A couple of times, he was forcibly reminded that, while his body might not be fully solid, the ring was. He got the hang of it, eventually, and managed to avoid any further obstacles – but it was still taking longer than Harry liked.

He put the time to good use, planning what he would do when he rejoined his body. Assuming I can kill Nagini, right off... well, then I have to face Voldemort. I'm master of the Stone, and the Cloak – two of the Deathly Hallows. Can I use them, somehow, to counter the Elder Wand? Voldemort's its master, since he killed Snape, right there in the Shrieking Shack... and Snape had killed Dumbledore...

Half a mo. Didn't Dumbledore just say that he'd planned his death along with Snape? That he did it that way on purpose, to break the Wand's power forever? So Snape wasn't ever the Wand's master... which means Voldemort isn't, either.

But then... then when Dumbledore died, who did become the Elder Wand's master?

When he finally emerged from the Forbidden Forest, he was afraid he was too late. The massed Death Eaters and their allies were in front of the castle, confronting the defenders of Hogwarts. Voldemort

was monologuing, of course, and Neville Longbottom knelt before Voldemort... the Sorting Hat on his head.

And as Harry watched, Neville reached up and, in one smooth motion, pulled the Sword of Gryffindor out of the Hat and struck Nagini's head from her body.

There was a great tumult in both armies. The Death Eaters surged forward, forcing Hogwarts's defenders back into the castle. Harry could sense that the fighting continued within the castle, but for the moment, he paid no attention to it. He'd spotted his inert body, lying abandoned and forgotten on the ground.

Carefully he walked over to it, circled it once, regarded it from all sides. Then he laid his spectral body down on top of his physical body, and was delighted when they began to merge. He closed his eyes as a wave of vertigo swept through him.

After another moment, Harry cautiously opened his eyes. They were his physical eyes this time, he could see in color. He could hear again. He could feel his arms and legs – boy, did they ache! That settled the matter: he was definitely back in his body. Painfully, he struggled to his feet. The Ring, somehow, was still on his finger; the Cloak, still under his clothes. He reached into his pocket and brought out the wand he'd been using: Draco Malfoy's wand.

Draco's the only other person it could be, Harry told himself. He disarmed Dumbledore the night he died, and disarming must have been enough. Draco became the master of the Elder Wand, even though he never knew it. And I disarmed Draco, so...

He raised the wand and, just as he had in the first task of the Triwizard Tournament, he filled his thoughts with the image of the item he wanted. It helped that, if he was right, the item in question would know that it was Harry's, and would cooperate... might even lend its power to the spell. "Accio Elder Wand," he said, softly but firmly.

From far off he heard the ksssh of a breaking window, then a streak in the air coming right at him. Trained Seeker's reflexes kicked in, and Harry dropped Draco's wand and raised his hand in time to catch the missile. It was the Elder Wand, the Wand of Destiny. He'd done it.

Even as his fingers closed around the Wand, Harry felt a cold shiver run through his body. It was the complete opposite of the tingly warmth he'd experienced when he'd purchased his first wand at Ollivander's, a geologic age ago. But he knew it had the same significance: beyond doubt now, the Wand was his. All the Deathly Hallows were his. Harry had become... well, not Death itself, nor Death's master – Dumbledore's talk at "King's Cross" had dispelled that notion – but Death's vizier, as it were. He could not order Death... but he could give orders in Death's name.

I came back to my body too late, blast it, Harry thought. If I'd come back while we were still in the clearing, I could have stopped Voldemort there. But now there's been fighting, and more deaths. And they're still fighting in the castle, I can hear it now. Voldemort must have stolen someone else's wand when his own went flying.

This has to stop now. I don't dare take the time to stumble in there and confront Voldemort: people are dying! I have to finish this now, and since I have all three Deathly Hallows, I can do it.

Harry closed his eyes again, and though his link with the Dark Lord had been severed with the destruction of the Horcrux in his head, he knew his enemy well enough to picture him perfectly in his mind. Tom Marvolo Riddle, he said in his head, and felt quite sure that Riddle could hear him. You called yourself the Wing of Death, as though it would make you safe from Death. But Death comes for everyone, sooner or later. And now, it comes for you.

Die, Tom Marvolo Riddle.

It seemed to Harry that Voldemort was struggling: he could feel his foe's fury, and an attempt at avoidance (avoiding Harry? something in the battle?), and then an enveloping darkness. He brought his awareness back to the physical world: had he imagined it, or was there a pause in the distant noise of battle? Then there came to his ears a tremendous roar of voices, and even some cheering. Harry could tell from the sounds that the battle was over. Lord Voldemort was no more.

It was over. At last, after all these years, it was finally over. Harry could stagger back into Hogwarts, greet his friends and teachers, and...

His eyes opened to see the Elder Wand in his hand.

And then the whole farce starts all over again.

How many people have died because of this Wand, these Hallows? If I go in there and explain how I survived, how many new enemies will I make? All the Dark-Lord-wannabes who want the Wand's power? Dumbledore let himself be killed – actually planned to be killed – so that the Wand would lose all its power forever. Can I do less?

I... I have to finish what he started. I can't ever let myself be disarmed, or beaten in battle. Ever. And the only way to do that... is to leave.

If I leave now, it'll be so easy. Everyone already thinks I'm dead. They'll be able to get on with their lives, with the least amount of fuss. All they need is a body to bury. I can do that.

Harry looked around and spotted a fallen log, at the edge of the Forest. A quick wave of the Wand – he didn't even need an incantation, it was so powerful – brought the log to his feet. He Transfigured the log to look like his dead body, complete with clothes, even with glasses. He even put Draco's wand in its pocket.

After a moment's thought, Harry Transfigured a branch to look like his own holly-and-phoenix wand, the wand Hermione had accidentally broken. He still wanted to keep the pieces – maybe the Elder Wand could repair them – but it would be suspicious if they weren't found on the body. He slipped the faked wand pieces into another pocket.

One more thing I should do... I need to do. It's only right. A last wave of the Wand conjured a piece of parchment from thin air. He paused, considering, then made the parchment dirtier, more wrinkled... rather more expected for a parchment he'd supposedly been carrying in his pocket. Harry began to dictate, and words appeared on the parchment: explaining how he'd discovered that he, Harry, had been a Horcrux, and that's why he had to die. Willing his possessions to Ron, and Hermione, and his new godson Teddy. Saying goodbye.

He heard voices from the castle... someone was coming. Quickly he stuffed the parchment into the body's pocket, next to the phoenix wand. Whipping out his Invisibility Cloak, he discovered that it had altered color: it was less silvery, more pearly-grey, as though the addition of the other two Hallows had changed it. Harry wrapped the Cloak around his body, and was surprised when it conformed itself snugly around his limbs – morphing from a cloak into a full-body suit. The Cloak had changed: there was no danger of, say, a foot accidentally being seen now.

Resolutely, Harry turned away from the approaching voices and walked calmly back to the Forest. He didn't look back to see who was coming for his body, didn't want to be tempted from his path. This was the best way, the only way, really, to remove the threat of the Hallows' power forever. Just as he'd walked with open eyes to his death, now he would willingly walk into exile. And yes, it would be painful at first, but at least there would be no battles in his future. Harry felt he'd earned that much, at least.

I've had enough trouble for a lifetime.

II: How It Started Again

"Lupin," said Ted Lupin, hearing the nervousness in his voice, and hating it, "reservation for two."

He kept his eyes fixed on the maître d' of the Idée Fixe, as the man impassively scanned his reservation list. Ted wished now that he'd dared to alter his appearance to something more, well, mature. Not that there was anything immature about being fifteen, but maybe a squarer jaw or a steelier eye would convince the maître d' that Ted knew what he was doing.

On this, his first solo foray into Muggle London. At a very posh restaurant. With a very beautiful girl.

He snuck a sidelong glance at his date, and was reassured. So many other girls wanted Ted to morph into the boy of their dreams... only Tori had insisted (i.e., demanded) that he never morph his features, even a little bit, but that he always be himself. Ted was determined to be the best "himself" he could be, for her.

"Ah yes, M. Lupin," replied the maître d' with a hint of Parisian accent. "Your table is ready. This way, please?"

They followed the maître d' into the dining room, and Ted began to relax. That wasn't so bad after all. He ought to have known his guardian angel would be watching after him. Ted hadn't been able to contact him, but he must have seen the reservation list – and besides, he knew everything. He'd certainly know that Ted and Tori would be dining here tonight. All would be well.

And the food would be outstanding.

Ted knew they were collecting glances (and a few stares) as they made their way to their table, but it was understandable. Even with her Veela charms muted, as they must be in a Muggle setting, Victoire Weasley was stunningly attractive... somehow, tonight, looking much older than her fourteen years. Ted was more than content to let his date be the center of attention; instead, he fell back slightly and eavesdropped on snippets of conversation from other tables. Maybe he'd hear something he could use during his own dinner talk with Tori.

One snippet caught his ear: "... you hear about those lost children? Thank goodness they were rescued in time, their families had just about given up hope... no, the rangers said it was just good luck..." That was a snippet Ted didn't dare mention to Tori, alas, but he couldn't help smiling anyway. Guardian angels everywhere, seemed like.

He made a show of holding Tori's chair for her, and was rewarded with her dimpled smile. "I hope you're not too disappointed," he said as he took his own seat. "It's supposed to be really good French cuisine..."

"... for the English, you mean?" she smirked.

"All right, it probably doesn't compare with your grandmother's cooking, but give it a chance." Privately, Ted was willing to match the fare at the Idée Fixe with the best France could offer, but try telling that to a Frenchwoman. Even a half-Frenchwoman.

They placed their orders – Tori asked for lapin aux pommes, while he chose the filet de boeuf Wellington, which he considered a thoroughly British dish despite its French name – and chatted about inconsequential as their glasses were filled with sparkling perry. Ted wished he could try to order wine, he'd been curious to see what it was like... but he knew better than to try. Sometimes, being underage sucked.

Their salads arrived, crisp and fresh, and Tori switched topics in a lower voice. "So do you know who the new Gryffindor prefects will be?" she asked.

Ted shook his head. "Not me, that's all I know. I don't seem to be the role model McGonagall's looking for." He lowered his voice further. "I am hoping to make Quidditch captain this year, but we won't find out about that until tomorrow at the Sorting Feast."

"Yes. Back to school tomorrow." She sighed, then smiled radiantly. "I am glad you asked me out tonight, Teddy. One last night of freedom – and in, er, regular London! How did you find this place?"

"Oh," Ted waved his hand airily, "you know I like spending time on this side of the wall. It's right amazing what you can find on the

Internet... I still wish your father would let me show you what it can do."

"I don't think it's the Internet that bothers Dad so much, as it is the small, isolated, private little workshop where you use it." Tori's eyes danced with mirth as she added, "Besides, I've heard of some of the things you can, er, download. Music? And the pictures? Scandalous, I mean really."

"I'm sure I have no idea what you mean, m'dear," Ted replied with a smirk. "And hey, are you saying your father doubts my intentions towards you?"

"Oh no, I think he has no doubt at all."

"Ho ho." Ted left it at that. If he felt he was too young for a seduction, he was sure Tori was. They'd made it clear that, when they were old enough, and if they were still dating... then they'd see what happened. For now, though, flirtation was fun. "Tell him I'm not nearly as afraid of him as I am of your Mum," he added, just to be provocative.

Tori gave a mock shiver. "Don't blame you a bit, cheri. Just be warned, Mum's seeing me to the Express tomorrow."

"I shall be the perfect gentleman, then," Ted replied in an upper-crust accent. "If only not to alarm Rosie. She's a firstie this year, remember. Don't want to scare her off before she's Sorted."

"No fear, Teddy. She idolizes you, you know." Her smile turned warm and she laid her hand atop his. "Perfectly natural, really," she added softly.

Ted couldn't help blushing... and she made no move to remove her hand from his, which caused his blush to deepen... He was rescued from his embarrassment by the arrival of the soup course. He'd ordered French onion, of course, and was pleased to see its cheese crust had been baked on. Tori, just to test the kitchen's mettle, had ordered bouillabaisse... she regarded it skeptically, fully expecting it to be merely fish stew, and filled her spoon.

And that was when disaster reared its ugly head, sniffed the air hopefully, and prepared to pounce.

"Now you see, if this were real bouillabaisse, the fish would be served separate from the stock," Tori lectured, as the first spoon of soup came to her mouth. She sipped, swallowed, and nodded. "Not bad," she allowed. Another spoonful, and she declared, "Why, that's quite good." A third sip, and she set down her spoon and stared incredulously at Ted.

"What?" he asked nervously.

"Have you tasted this?" Without waiting for him to answer, Tori raised her hand frantically. Their waiter arrived with astonishing promptness. "Pardonnez-moi," she said, deliberately reverting to a strong French accent, "but I just wished to say 'ow delicious zis is! I 'ave not tasted anything like zis since I was last in Marseilles!"

"Thank you, mademoiselle," beamed the waiter. Ted was shocked to see that Tori was actually using her Veela power on the poor man – in public! In front of Muggles! Merlin's beard, what was she thinking?

"Would you do a small favor for me?" She opened her handbag and rummaged for a moment, bringing out a folded slip of paper. "Would you please deliver zis to your chef and tell him 'ow marvelous an artist he is?"

"But of course, mademoiselle," the waiter replied, taking the paper. "At once. I may say we at the Idée Fixe are quite pleased with our sous-chef... versatile at many tasks, but a particularly deft hand with soups and sauces." With a slight bow, he left them, heading for the swinging doors that led to the kitchen.

"Tori, what do you think you're doing?" hissed Ted.

"Taste the bouillabaisse," Tori answered obliquely. She was watching the waiter intently.

Helplessly, Ted slurped a spoonful of the soup. "Okay, so?"

Tori spared him a glance. "Sorry, I forgot. You don't drink a lot of wine at your house, do you?"

"Huh?" Ted tried to regain some control of the situation. "What was on that paper you gave him?"

"Nothing, it's blank. I just needed a reason for him to... there!" The waiter had opened the swinging door and was offering the paper to someone in the kitchen. With a bound, Tori was on her feet and darting for the kitchen, ignoring the astonished looks from the other patrons.

Oh God, NO! In a panic, Ted pursued his date, grabbing her by the arm just as she reached the kitchen door. The amiable waiter was still standing there, blocking her view. He turned as Tori all but collided with his back. "Mademoiselle?"

"Forgive me, but I simply had to offer my personal compliments to your..." She paused and looked around the waiter's torso. "Where is he?"

The waiter looked over his shoulder, puzzled. "I don't know... he was here but a moment ago. I can assure you, though, M. Clayman was very pleased to receive your praise..."

"And he deserves it," Ted put in hastily, pulling Tori out of the kitchen. "Thanks so much... I know the rest of the dinner will be just as good, so we should be getting back to it..." He returned to their table, his hand still wrapped around Tori's upper arm. Literally wrapped around: he'd unintentionally morphed his hand, elongating his fingers to guarantee she couldn't break loose. She had no choice but to follow him.

"What are you doing?" she demanded in a whisper. "Magic in front of Muggles?"

"My thoughts exactly, Little Miss Veela," he whispered back. "Why did you...?"

She broke in to what he was about to say. "This Mr. Clayman – he must be a wizard, Teddy! He must have Apparated out when he heard me coming!"

Ted kept his face neutral while he tried to salvage what he could from this fiasco. "All right... one, a wizard wouldn't be working as a cook in a Muggle restaurant – I mean, think about it, he'd be working in a wizarding restaurant. Two, even if he was a wizard, so what? It's not like he's done anything magical in front of Muggles – unlike

you. You Veela'd that guy, and then made a scene so everyone'd be sure to notice! We'll be lucky if the Obliviators aren't here any moment. People have had their wands snapped for less."

She gulped, only now realizing the enormity of what she'd done.

He released his hold on her arm, surreptitiously returning his fingers to normal, and adopted a more conciliatory tone. "I'm sorry, Tori. I guess I saw you doing magic, and I overreacted... but you have to admit, so did you." He took his seat; by reflex, she promptly did the same.

"I did, I know I did! Oh, Teddy, I'm sorry..."

"Sokay, I understand. You want to be a detective when you grow up." He gave her a slightly mocking smile, as though to say he was joking but also serious. He knew perfectly well who Tori wanted to be like when she grew up. Ted grew somber as he realized she was still upset.

"Tori, let's just... all right, if you're really worried, I can send an owl to the Ministry tomorrow from Hogwarts, and ask them to check and see if everything's on the level here." Ted caught her eye and tried to reassure her. "And in the meantime, let's see if we can enjoy ourselves for the rest of the evening, 'kay?"

"You're right. Okay, I'll try. Thank you..." Tori gave him the apologetic smile that (though he'd never admit it) always softened his heart, and settled down to her dinner. After a minute or two, they began to make small talk about their upcoming Hogwarts classes, and Ted congratulated himself on having averted a major incident.

He thus failed to notice that the cause of the incident, the small bowl of bouillabaisse, had disappeared from the table.

Harry Potter, known to the staff at the Idée Fixe as Jacob Clayman, sous-chef de cuisine, let himself into his flat well after eleven that night – which was still earlier than he normally did – and leaned back against the closed door. He took a moment to try to calm his nerves. That had been far too close a call, that evening. What in Merlin's name had Teddy been thinking...?

And at that moment, as if in response, the phone rang. The restaurant again? He checked the Caller ID, and didn't recognize the number; cautiously, he picked up the receiver. "Hello?"

"Um, hi, Harry." It was Teddy. He sounded worried. And well he should, thought Harry.

"Teddy? Where are you? How in Merlin's name can you be calling me...?" In the ten years since Harry had first sent a birthday gift (anonymously) to Teddy, never had Teddy ever contacted him. Harry had always been the one to initiate their contacts. He couldn't imagine how Teddy had even got his phone number!

"Er, online phone directory," Teddy said, as though it were obvious. Well, to someone of his generation, thought Harry ruefully, it probably was. "I mean, the waiter tonight said your name was Clayman, and I just reckoned your phone 'ud be in the same name." There was a short pause, in which Teddy was plainly gathering courage. The next words came out in a rush. "Harry, I'm sorry, about tonight I mean. I just wanted to show Tori a good time on our last night before school, and you always talk about how good the Fixe's food is... I didn't think there'd be any problem, and anyway, I thought for sure you'd've seen my name on the list..."

Harry sighed. "Slow down, Teddy, slow down. Relax a mo. Yes, I might've seen your name if I'd looked, but I've been running around quite a bit today. I never got the chance." He sighed again, too exhausted to maintain anger. There was obviously no point in berating the boy for not giving him any warning that he was coming – bringing any witch, much less Victoire Weasley! – when he'd never been given Harry's number. Although a note sent back to the kitchen might've been nice.

"Anyway..." Teddy's voice turned formal. "I won't do it again, godfather."

"A-hem. I thought I told you to call me Harry." Harry had always called his own godfather by his first name, and he insisted that Teddy do the same for him.

"Um, right, sorry." Then, with a meekness both knew was assumed, "And I thought you were going to start calling me Ted."

They managed to share a laugh at that. "Well, anyway, Ted, we got lucky tonight. Nobody from the Ministry saw fit to investigate. I'm guessing that none of the diners thought it was anything more than a beautiful young girl being headstrong. No harm done," he finished, lying smoothly. In point of fact, he'd already had to do some damage control with his employers, and he could look forward to a lot more work tonight.

"Yeah, but now she's thinking there might be an unregistered wizard... you know, a late-bloomer that never got registered with the Ministry? And I had to tell her I'd owl the Ministry, just to calm her down..."

"Then do that. Only send the owl to the Misuse of Muggle Artifacts Department. They'll check, confirm that no Muggle artifacts were misused, and that'll be that. Case closed." Harry took a deep breath, preparing for his next deception. "Actually, this'll be a good time for them to investigate. You see, the reason I was running around so much today is that I'm getting ready to go on holiday."

"Oh, Merlin, I didn't know! Um, it's not..."

"No, no, nothing to do with what happened this evening," Harry hastened to assure him, sounding very sincere. "I'd been planning this for about a month, now."

"Oh! Well, that's great news, Harry, you deserve a break. Where do you think you'll go?"

"Switzerland," said Harry, choosing a country at random, and some inner imp prompted him to add, "Reichenbach Falls. I've always wanted to see the place, it's supposed to be stunning. Anyway, though, I'll be incommunicado until I get home, and you'll be back at Hogwarts by then... so I'll get in touch with you around Christmas. Try to stay out of mischief until then, if you can."

"If you wanted me to stay out of mischief, why'd you give me the Map? No, but seriously, Harry, what if something important comes up? What if... what if there is still a problem because of tonight?"

Ted had a point there. Harry was quite certain that the incident at the Idée Fixe hadn't yet run its course. "Um, all right. Let me give you my mobile number – for emergencies only," he emphasized.

"You have a mobile...?" Ted began, then fell silent. He was once more confronting the fact that his godfather lived in a very different world: a world where secrecy was, for some reason, absolutely essential. No one at all, for any reason, ever, could know about Harry Potter – even Ted was told only what he had a need to know. Harry had repeatedly drilled Ted on this point, since he'd first made his identity known, and Ted knew better than to question it.

Harry recited the number, then continued, "Memorize it. Do not write it down. Do not program it into your own mobile – I assume you're calling on a mobile? From your workshop?"

"Yeah! I got it this summer so I could keep in touch with some friends – and this way, their parents don't see owls or anything. As long as I'm far enough away from magic, it works fine. Won't work at Hogwarts, of course." Ted gave Harry his own mobile number.

"All right, then," said Harry. "Go back to Hogwarts, and don't worry about anything except Quidditch, you hear? Tonight was an accident, and accidents happen. Nothing to worry about." He laughed. "I'll send you a postcard. Unsigned, of course. Have fun this year, Ted. Oh, don't forget that special package... and listen, you be careful with Tori Weasley. Don't do anything compromising, if you know what mean."

"Oh, I won't, Harry," Ted promised. "Like I told her tonight, her Mum is downright scary. Oh, and Harry? Good work with those lost kids." The relief was evident in his voice. His guardian angel was on the job again, and all would be well.

Harry smiled. "Thanks. Be well, Ted."

"Bye."

Harry hung up the phone and immediately lost his smile.

He rolled up his left sleeve to reveal the Elder Wand, strapped to his forearm. He wore it there at all times, just as he always wore the Resurrection Stone, just as the Stealth Cloak was always tucked around his waist under his clothes. He unbuttoned his shirt now, unstrapping the Wand and taking out the Cloak. With a flourish, he

swirled the Cloak around his shoulders. The Cloak settled and fit itself snugly around his body.

When Harry had first learned that his father's Invisibility Cloak was a Deathly Hallow, he had a hard time believing it. After all, for something that was supposed to hide its wearer from Death, it did a poor job: Dementors weren't fooled by it, heck, even Mad-Eye Moody's magical eye could see through it. Once Harry had the other two Hallows in hand, however, the Cloak changed dramatically. Its color became pearly-grey; it fitted itself to the shape of its wearer; and it became, not merely an Invisibility Cloak, but a Stealth Cloak. When he wore it, Harry was invisible, inaudible, scentless; he left no footprints in snow, made no swath in fog; neither mail owls, nor the goblins of Gringotts, nor the magic detectors of the Ministry, could find him. For all intents and purposes, when he wore the Cloak, Harry didn't exist.

Which was why he'd worn it continuously for the first year after Voldemort's death. Never removing it, not for sleeping, not for eating, not even for bathing (Scourgify and Tergeo inside the Cloak worked well enough). He still slept in the Cloak, for safety's sake.

And now, he would again wear it continuously, until he was sure that any Ministry investigators were stymied.

I ought to've known Teddy'd be the weak chink in my armor, Harry thought, striding to the center of the flat. If I hadn't promised Remus... but I did. And Remus and Tonks died fighting at Hogwarts, to buy me time. Wizarding debts don't take my convenience into account, now do they?

He cleared his mind as he readied the Wand for use. 'Course, I gave the restaurant staff a different story than the one I told Teddy, he recalled. I explained my sudden disappearance from the kitchen tonight as just stepping outside to take a phone call – from my brother-in-law, who was telling me about my sister's sudden illness. I told them I had to leave for a week or two, family emergency and all that. Have to admit, they were pretty understanding about it.

A week or two should do it, one way or another. By then, I'll know how closely the Ministry's watching... and whether Jacob Clayman has to disappear for good. Probably, yes. Luckily, Howard Seaker is up-to-date.

A wave of the Elder Wand, and Harry's possessions began to shrink. He shifted his focus slightly, and his clothing marched out from the bedroom and began to fold itself neatly. He went everywhere in the flat, removing all trace of the individual who lived here.

With a thought, he conjured a trunk and watched as all the items in the flat packed themselves into it neatly. The contents of his larder went, sagaciously, into a separate box. Harry might have been able to do the same spells with his holly wand, but the Elder Wand would leave no magical traces. And the spells were easy as pie with the Elder Wand, much faster – and time was most definitely of the essence.

The first time I met Arthur Weasley, he'd just come home from a set of nighttime raids, looking for Misused Muggle Artifacts. So I have to assume that someone from the Ministry is on the night shift – and could be at the restaurant right now. If not now, then certainly by this time tomorrow. I have to be long gone by then.

After all, it's not Tori's mum I'm worried about. It's Tori's aunt.

III: The Witch Who Won

"Ma foi, I swear," murmured Fleur Weasley, surveying Platform Nine and Three-Quarters critically, "it seems as if we have more first-years this year than last – again."

"Well, maybe everyone waited until You-Know-Who was killed," suggested Victoire helpfully. "To, you know, have kids."

"And your point would be what, My Prime Example?" her mother responded dryly. Victoire knew quite well that she'd been born on the first anniversary of Voldemort's defeat – her name was a dead giveaway, after all – and she was perfectly capable of subtracting nine months from that date.

"Um, well... that you and Dad were first out of the block?" Victoire hurriedly scanned the platform, seeking – and finding – a change of subject. "Teddy! Over here!"

Ted Lupin came trotting over to them, his wheeled trunk following a couple of paces behind. He had a respectful greeting for Fleur and a broad smile for her daughter. "Morning, Madame Weasley. Salut, Tori! Where's your dad?" Hand over his heart, he gave them a slight, whimsical bow. He'd kept the regular features and light brown hair that he'd worn to the Idée Fixe the previous night, but his eyes were glinting with red and gold as befit a true Gryffindor.

"He had to stay home for Dobbywatch," replied Tori, who couldn't help grinning. "My, my, aren't we in the mood for a Sorting. Subliminal suggestion, much?"

He grinned back. "Well, the more ickle firsties that aren't scared of Gryffindor before they even arrive at the school, the more new Gryffindors we end up with. And anyway, I promised Professor Longbottom."

"Speaking of first-years," put in Fleur, "have you seen your cousin Rose yet, fille?" Victoire shook her head.

"I thought I saw red hair," Ted looked over his shoulder, "back there. Shall we reconnoiter?" With his head turned, he missed the significant looks that Fleur and Victoire traded one another.

They'd chosen one of the more private corners of the platform, and Hermione Granger-Weasley had cast unobtrusive Notice-Me-Not charms around them as well. There were still the occasional passersby who eyed her curiously, but at least they wouldn't interrupt.

"No, don't be ridiculous," she was now telling her daughter Rose, "of course you won't be Sorted by wrestling a troll. I'm surprised you ever listened to your Uncle George – that joke must have whiskers, he's been telling it so long now."

Rose grimaced and pushed a lock of hair away from her face. She greatly disliked her hair, which combined the fiery red of the Weasley clan with her mother's unmanageable locks. One or the other, she felt, would have been fair; getting both, decidedly not. "How then...?" she began.

Hermione shook her head. "I won't say... but rest assured, you'll be Sorted correctly. Just be yourself, and it will all work out well."

Ron nodded agreement. "Of course, if you're sorted into Slytherin, we'll disinherit you," he added with a smirk, "but no pressure."

"Ronald!" she hissed as she glared icily at him. Rose's eyes had gone wide with anxiety, bordering on panic.

Hermione dropped to one knee so that she could look Rose in the eye. "There's nothing wrong with Slytherin – despite what some people still think," she added with an acid glance at Ron. "All four Houses have their good points, and their bad points, and all have produced outstanding wizards and witches."

"But if I am Sorted into Slytherin..."

"Then you'll still be our daughter, and we'll love you very much," Hermione finished, giving Rose a hug. "We're proud of you, Rose, and no amount of Sorting will ever change that." She maintained the hug but said no more, pointedly waiting for Ron to back her up.

"Erm, yeah," coughed Ron, "Ravenclaw, well, you'd do fine there, of course, smart as you are... and, erm, it's almost impossible to go wrong with Hufflepuff..." He sighed. "Just don't worry about it,

Rosie," he summed up. "Whichever House gets you, they're getting a damn fine student, right?"

"Not quite how I'd have phrased it," Hermione said, straightening, "but essentially yes."

Rose nodded. "It would be nice to be in Gryffindor, though," she said, somewhat wistfully. Ron was about to say something about all the Weasleys always landing in Gryffindor when she added, "Then I'd be in the same House as Teddy."

"Why, I do believe I heard my name," drawled a new voice. Ted stood at the edge of the Notice-Me-Not field: the charms kept him from looking directly at them, but he'd morphed the corners of his eyes to expand his peripheral vision. One side of his mouth crooked up. "Um, may I...?"

"Oh. Oh, yes, we're done here." Hermione canceled the charm field as Fleur and Victoire approached. "Hello, everyone," she added, the animation fading from her face.

"...h'lo Teddy..." Rose managed to choke out. If there'd been any doubt that she was a Weasley, her bright red face would have dispelled it.

He dealt with her crush as he always did, by ignoring it. "Is your trunk here? Tori and I are about to find a compartment, we can find one for you too... and maybe you'll see some of your dormmates-to-be."

Victoire smiled at Rose and extended her hand, as Ted took possession of Rose's trunk. "Come, cousin, this is where the adventure begins." They made their farewells to Fleur, Hermione and Ron and started for the Hogwarts Express. The adults watched them go... and both Fleur and Ron noticed the brightness of Hermione's eyes.

"Have to say, there goes our finest achievement," Ron said in a low voice. Hermione nodded, her eyes still on Rose.

"So how go things with you?" Fleur asked Hermione. "Any new word on the Minister?"

Hermione blinked, and switched from maternal mode to professional mode in a heartbeat. "Still failing. His mind is still clear, at least, but he spends four days a week at home in bed. I don't dare ask the Healers, of course... but I doubt he'll survive past the New Year, poor man..."

Standing to one side, forgotten, Ron cleared his throat. "Well, uh, if you two don't need me, I'll be heading back to the shop. George is waiting for me."

"Oh, of course," Hermione responded, giving him a quick peck on the cheek. "Thank you for coming today, Ron. It meant so much to Rose for us both to see her off."

"Wouldn't have missed it," he responded in all sincerity. "Um, I'll be in touch." With a wave to his sister-in-law, Ron headed for the Platform's Apparation Point. Hermione turned back to Fleur. "And, as I was saying, Kingsley's illness puts all our plans in turmoil..."

Fleur flicked her gaze for an instant to Ron's retreating figure, and she suppressed a sigh. She couldn't help but worry about Hermione's increasing bouts of melancholia. Rose was the only thing that could bring a sparkle to her eyes anymore... Rose, and on occasion, her work for the Wizengamot.

Certainly not the man whom wizarding law insisted was her husband.

Well, perhaps Victoire's little adventure last night will pique her interest, thought Fleur. "I'd like your opinion on something," she said, reaching into her purse. She brought out a sealed tumbler and offered it to Hermione. At Hermione's questioning look, she continued, "Victoire brought it back from her date with Teddy. He took her to dinner in Muggle London."

A flick of Fleur's wand opened the seal on the tumbler. "Victoire managed to Transfigure a bit of crockery into this, and apply a Warming Charm. Quite clever of her, really, considering the circumstances. Taste and tell me what you think."

Puzzled but willing, Hermione sipped from the tumbler. "Bouillabaisse," she said immediately. "I remember it from holidays in France; my parents used to take me there as a girl. Hm... not bad. Not too much saffron here, which is good, and they must have used

a white wine stock..." She paused, her tongue between her lips, then took another quick sip. Her eyebrows went up. "You said this is from Muggle London?"

"Ah, good, you can taste it, then?"

"Taste it? Isn't it obvious? This... this was made with elf wine!" Hermione looked aghast. "How in heaven's name did elf-made wine end up in a Muggle restaurant's kitchen?"

"Oh, it gets better," said Fleur. "Perhaps I'm more accustomed to the taste of French dishes, but I can detect at least two magical herbs they used as flavorings, in addition to the saffron and garlic. Subtle, but unmistakable. Victoire let me taste it last night, and we reached the same conclusion: her dinner was cooked by a wizard."

Hermione handed the soup back to Fleur. "Interesting. I suppose it could be a Squib, someone who chose to make their living amongst Muggles rather than wizards..." She regarded Fleur thoughtfully. "Except you'd hardly be bringing something so minor to a Senior Counsel for the Wizengamot, would you?"

Fleur gave a Gallic shrug. "Victoire says Teddy promised to bring it to the Ministry's attention... but she feels he's dismissing it too lightly. She is feeling very clever, rather the detective, and wants to see the matter through. She's trying to live up to her role model, after all."

As Hermione hesitated, Fleur pressed onward. "At the very least, this is a potential violation of the Secrecy Statutes. And surely there are some in Magical Law Enforcement who wouldn't mind doing a favor for The Witch Who..."

"Please don't," interrupted Hermione with a pained expression. "Fine, Fleur, I'll start some inquiries. Do we have an address?"

The same morning sun that shone on Platform Nine and Three-Quarters shone most irritatingly in Harry's eyes. He snorted, tried to roll over in his bed, and finally gave up sleep as a lost cause for the moment. With a grunt, he swung his feet to the floor and sat up in bed. No one who might have been in the inn room would have seen or heard anything at all – Harry slept, as he always did, with the Stealth Cloak wrapped around him.

Harry would have liked to use a Fidelius Charm on himself, as the best way to hide the fact of his existence. Initially, he hadn't the skill for such a complex charm, though he certainly had the power. Eventually, he came face-to-face with a hard truth: the Deathly Hallows defied all attempts at concealment. They might obscure themselves, but no outside force might do so. (It made sense: even Dumbledore, who easily used the Fidelius to hide Phoenix HQ, and who had much more incentive to hide the Elder Wand, couldn't do it. Come to that, it explained why Harry's father had left the Cloak in Dumbledore's care: if James and Lily Potter were to be hidden under the Fidelius, the Cloak couldn't go with them.)

So Harry had to resort to subterfuges such as he had last night. Oh, he could probably have found an empty house and settled in, a squatter, as Horace Slughorn had been the first time they'd met – but on the other hand, that was one of the many things he loathed about Slughorn.

After vacating his flat, he'd Apparated to Manchester. At a modest inn on the edge of town, he slipped behind the front desk and watched the night clerk as she worked... learning the system. Just before the night shift ended, Harry had waited for the clerk to be distracted, then entered a two-week reservation for an empty room into the inn's computer, programmed a room key, and slipped a stack of pound notes into the till. The day clerk would assume the night clerk had done it.

Thus Harry had his room at the inn, honestly paid for. He hadn't even needed to Confund anyone this time, for which he was grateful – he hated Confounding. The "Do Not Disturb" sign was now on the door, and he would remain undisturbed while he planned his activities.

Now let's see, where was that newspaper...?

Absently, he brought the Reducio'd box of food out of his pocket and levitated it over to the room's tiny kitchenette, while he pored over the local newspaper. The box enlarged itself, opened, and spewed food items into the air, which automatically sorted themselves onto shelves or into the icebox, as appropriate. Except for diverting a bit of pastry to his open hand, Harry gave the process no thought.

Orphanage, he thought to himself, finding the news article. Yes, an old building, needing a lot of repairs. A public appeal for donations. Well, I'm afraid I can't give money: Jacob Clayman's savings may have to last for a long while. But I can pay them a visit this afternoon, and make sure they need fewer repairs than they think. Their hot water boiler will never break down again, and it'll consume a lot less gas. Wish I could make it use no gas at all, but that would look suspicious – still, I can forge a letter from npower saying they've fixed their leaky gas lines, reducing their bill.

Their electric bulbs won't need replacing any more, either. And maybe there'll be other "fixes" I can do, as well... inconspicuous, little, but they add up. Harry had to smile. It's one more way the Hallows contribute back to the community, and about time, too.

He finished his pastry, dutifully applied a Tergeo charm to his teeth, and Disapparated from the inn.

It was a few days later that Hermione arrived in the atrium of the Ministry of Magic. She nodded to the guard on duty, and today succeeded in reaching the lift without once looking at the Harry Potter Memorial. She could never bear to look at the larger-than-life statue of Harry, or the glass case filled with memorabilia – she'd convinced herself it was because the Memorial was too gaudy.

Still, it could have been worse: it could have been in honor of Neville Longbottom – or her.

The lift opened and she entered, to find Blaise Zabini and two of his satellites already inside. "Morning, Zabini," she greeted him.

"Morning, Granger," he replied cordially, using her "professional" name (most of her Ministry co-workers felt "Granger-Weasley" too unwieldy for regular use, and she refused to answer to simply "Weasley"). "Busy day today for you... doesn't the Swivingham trial begin today?"

She shook her head. "Defense got an extra week for depositions," she said emotionlessly.

"Ah," he said as the lift stopped and he stepped off. "Well, not to worry – I'm sure you'll dispense the justice they so richly deserve." As always, it was hard to tell whether Zabini was being supportive or

sarcastic. In that regard, he hadn't changed much since his Hogwarts days: never openly opposing Draco Malfoy's faction within Slytherin, but never openly supporting it, either; neither a bearer of the Dark Mark nor a defender of Hogwarts from Death Eaters.

He'd cheerfully slit my throat, reflected Hermione, but only if he could make it look accidental.

She arrived at her offices, greeted her clerk in passing, and entered her chamber. On her desk, a number of memos already vied for her attention. (Literally: they bobbed up and down on her desk like hungry chicks in a nest. Someday, Hermione would do the research and discover who'd invented that spell, so that his body could be disinterred and thrown to the dogs.) She'd read them in a minute... she was still thinking about her encounter in the lift.

Blaise Zabini. He'd been an attractive boy at school, and he'd grown into a very handsome wizard. He was doing good work in the Department of International Magical Cooperation, from all she'd heard. And, in any discussion of who might succeed Kingsley Shacklebolt – discussions that were growing more frequent as Kingsley's illness grew worse – Zabini's name kept coming up.

Hermione couldn't really say she disliked the man. She could say, unequivocally, that she didn't trust him, but she would be hard pressed to explain why. The fact that Harry –

(She paused to steady herself, and take a deep breath.)

The fact that Harry had witnessed Zabini getting cozy with Malfoy, their sixth year, and agreeing completely with Malfoy's agenda – even though he wouldn't ally himself with Malfoy – wasn't something she could share with others. But it told her that Zabini certainly didn't embrace all the reforms that Kingsley had been instituting, these last fifteen years. Instituting with her active help, she was proud to say.

But his personal charm, his work record, and – she hated to admit it – his Pureblood status, made him a likely candidate to be Kingsley's successor. If Kingsley had a nominee of his own, he hadn't yet said anything. At the rate his health was failing, if he didn't say something soon...

With a shake of her head, Hermione settled into her chair behind her desk and began to open her waiting memos. Two memos on upcoming cases to be tried (she set those in a tray for more detailed reading later); a letter from Rose, delivered by owl that morning (gushing with details of her Sorting into Gryffindor – of course – and thanking Hermione for her present); a warning from the Department of Mysteries to ignore any sudden loud noises between 11 and 3 tomorrow (she had to wonder what they were testing down there)...

Ah, and a letter from the Improper Use of Magic Office, responding to her query. She nodded and raised her voice so the clerk in the outer office could hear. "Sheryl, could you send a note to Dennis and ask him to talk to me today?"

Two volumes on legal precedent regarding prostitution in Britain had been opened and perused before Dennis Creevey stuck his head into her office. "Hi, Hermione. You wanted to talk to me?"

"Yes, Dennis, come in." Hermione stretched an arm behind her and took a manila folder from the shelf. "Thank you for looking into that report of rogue magic for me."

"The fancy restaurant? No problem, it was fun. I let them think I was writing a food column for the local paper." Dennis took the chair next to Hermione's desk and carelessly swung one leg over the other. "Open-and-shut case, really. No magic done in the presence of Muggles, no Muggle artifacts cursed... it really looks like some wizarding foodstuffs accidentally ended up in their kitchen. Misdelivery, I'm guessing."

"Did you interview the chef, this..." Hermione opened the folder and read from the sheet inside. "This Clayman? Is he a Muggle, wizard, Squib, or what?"

"He wasn't there. Seems his sister had a medical emergency... he had to take an unpaid leave." Dennis shrugged. "I'll talk to him when he comes back."

"And the timing didn't seem suspicious to you? This person who might have violated our laws up and disappears, on the very night the violation may have occurred?" Hermione's eyes were beginning to flash dangerously. "Did you, perchance, make the effort to visit him at his home?"

"Well, uh, yeah, I tried." Dennis uncrossed his legs and sat straighter in his chair. He tugged nervously at his collar. "I got his address from the restaurant's employee records. But it's as I said in my report, the address must've been mistyped or something. The flat at that address was empty. No sign that anyone lived there."

"It was dusty, then? Unfurnished? Electricity turned off?" Hermione paused to let Dennis to realize where her thoughts were headed. "No? Creevey, it takes years for a cook to advance to sous-chef status. I sincerely doubt the restaurant owners had a wrong address for all those years. I think you had the right address, and I think our man did a bunk that night and cleaned up after himself very thoroughly." She lifted the memo she'd received from the Improper Use of Magic Office so he could see it. "But strangely, there was no record of magic use at that address on the night in question."

"Oh. Well, then, Clayman couldn't be a wizard, could he..." Dennis's relief died away under Hermione's steady gaze. "Except... if he moved all his stuff out of the flat that same night..."

"Exactly. If he did it the Muggle way, he must've had a lot of help, and surely one of his neighbors would have noticed. Perhaps you might ask them if they heard anything." Hermione tapped an imperious fingertip on the papers in front of her. "But if he used magic, he had to know how to keep his magical signature from being detected by the Ministry. Which makes him, not just a wizard, but a powerful wizard. Not the sort who'd be playing chef at a Muggle restaurant, don't you agree?"

She stood, and Dennis hastened to do the same. "I want to know what he was really doing there. Why he left so precipitously. Who he is. So please go back and do some serious checking, this time." Throughout the discussion, she hadn't once raised her voice; she had no need. Scalpels didn't have to be loud.

Nonetheless, he had to point out the difficulty. "There's still the part about no obvious crime having been committed. No Muggle saw magic, no one was cursed..." He cleared his throat before continuing. "I can't ask for one of the Ministry's Legilimenses without more evidence of wrongdoing than we have."

Hermione gave him a half-smile. "Dennis, I'm sure an investigator who wants promotion as much as you do will find a way to demonstrate his talents without needing a Legilimens." She handed him the folder and added, "Start with Clayman's neighbors, then his co-workers. See if they've noticed anything... unusual." She nodded in dismissal and sat down again, her attention already returning to the open reference books on her desk.

Dennis took the opportunity to leave quickly, counting himself lucky to have escaped with his skin (mostly) unflayed. He would go back to the Idée Fixe at once, and do a thorough check... both magical (spell residues) and Muggle (phone records). The latter would set him apart from his co-workers, give him visibility.

Yeah, this time he'd do the thing right, as he ought to have done the first time... do it, in other words, the way she would do it. The woman who had killed the Dark Lord Voldemort: Hermione Granger, The Witch Who Won.

IV: Pieces on the Board

There was a Healer watching him, but at least she was unobtrusive, sitting in the corner of the Minister's office, and not hovering beside him like a mother hen. Cushions kept him propped up in his chair, and a blanket was wrapped around his legs, but his robes were well-tailored and didn't let his body's gauntness show. Kingsley Shacklebolt might have to yield to the realities of his physical condition, but at least he could salvage a bit of his dignity.

"Thank you, Diggory," he said, as the Head of Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures concluded his report. "We'll want to keep moving forward with the Werewolf Registry reforms, of course, but it sounds as though things are well in hand." He coughed, and sipped from a goblet filled with green potion. "Let's move on. Department of Mysteries?"

Croaker, Head of the Department, gave the same three-word report he always gave at the Minister's weekly briefings. "Nothing to report."

Shacklebolt nodded; no news (from the Department of Mysteries) was usually good news. "Right. Department of International Cooperation?"

Kerrick, Head of the Department, gestured silently to his young protégé. Zabini cleared his throat and began, "The Benelux Ministries have finally agreed, in principle at least, to our proposal for free trade..." He continued for a few minutes, speaking in a low, pleasant voice that never lost his listeners' attention. Everyone around the table was nodding in appreciation as he concluded his report.

"Thank you, Zabini." It was obvious to Shacklebolt why Kerrick had Zabini give his reports: the young man was a charmer. International Magical Cooperation could do no wrong, if Blaise Zabini said it was well. "Let's wrap this up so we can get on with the day. Department of Magical Law Enforcement?"

Robards, Head of the Department, passed a sheaf of parchment around the table. "Take one and pass it on," he said. Given that Magical Law Enforcement was easily the largest Department in the Ministry, a written summary was far less tedious than a verbal report

would be. "You'll see the usual number of actions taken by our Aurors, Enforcers, and other agents. The statistical report shows no increase in Dark activity this year. At the moment, the Swivingham prostitution ring is attracting the most attention, and that case'll be brought before the Wizengamot within the week."

"Attention'? A bloomin' media circus," snorted Diggory. "I'm still surprised it wasn't thrown out of court."

"Granger's built a solid case," Robards countered. "I don't think they're going to slip away on a technicality."

"Technicality?" The disgust in Diggory's voice was unmistakable.

Further discussion was curtailed when the Minister began to cough again. The coughing fit was longer this time, more violent, and the Healer was halfway to Shacklebolt's seat before she was waved back. "I'll be all right," he managed to wheeze, taking another pull from his goblet. "Thank you for your concern, ladies and gentlemen. Robards, I'm pleased to hear about Granger's progress. I want all Departments to be ready to offer any assistance she may request. If there's no further business, this briefing is done." He caught Croaker's eye as the Department Heads stood and shuffled towards the door.

Croaker came to Shacklebolt's side and gave the Healer a mild glance. She nodded and retreated back to her corner, giving them privacy. He nodded in return and looked down impassively at Shacklebolt. It was typical of an Unspeakable: he wasn't about to volunteer information, even to the Minister of Magic.

"Did it work?" Shacklebolt asked.

Croaker didn't pretend to misunderstand. "No."

"So what happens now?"

A slight shrug. "We keep trying."

Shacklebolt scratched his ear thoughtfully. "Has it occurred to you that your best course of action may be to simply walk away from this? We've done without it for a long time, really: we don't execute criminals anymore. Not that Azkaban's a holiday resort."

"We've been denied access," said Croaker stonily. "We want to know why."

"And that's part of it, isn't it? How dare you be denied access, eh? Shoe's not very comfortable when it's on the other foot, is it?"

Stung, Croaker for once responded with more information. "We still have the runes that appeared; we will crack the code..." He fell abruptly silent as he realized how much he was saying.

"Well, keep me informed," Shacklebolt concluded. "Though I still say you should let sleeping dogs lie. It's not as though we ever knew what the thing really was."

A wintery smile tugged at Croaker's lips. "If we knew what it really was, it wouldn't be in the Department of Mysteries."

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Outside the Minister's office, Amos Diggory was managing to hold on to his temper, but it was proving a struggle. An outrage, that's what it was! What was the wizarding world coming to?

Someone fell into step beside him. He looked up to see Blaise Zabini walking with him. "You look troubled, Amos," he ventured.

Diggory champed his jaws and didn't respond for a moment. "I agree that Swivingham is slimy," he said eventually. "I think his whole organization is foul. He certainly ought to be put away."

Zabini nodded sympathetically. "A disgrace to the name of wizard."

"But for Granger to..." Diggory swallowed his words and fell silent. They continued down the corridor, Zabini patiently waiting.

"And the worst part? That Swivingham could actually find customers! Willing to pay for a roll in the muck!" burst out of Diggory. "Do they feel no shame?"

"That, of course, is what Granger will emphasize in her prosecution," noted Zabini. "Without paying customers, Swivingham's offense wouldn't have been so... lurid." He gave a graceful sigh. "I don't

blame her, of course; she can't help the way she was raised. Have you ever seen the Muggle tabloids? They air their dirty linen in public on a daily basis."

"I suppose I must get used to it," grumbled Diggory. "The Minister wants us to cooperate fully with her as she goes to trial..."

They'd reached the door to Diggory's office. He nodded farewell to Zabini and stepped inside. Zabini caught the edge of the door before Diggory could close it.

"There are... degrees of cooperation, Amos," he said softly. He gave Diggory a conspiratorial smile, released the door, and continued down the corridor to the lift.

"Hello, hello! Good to see your smiling faces," said Neville Longbottom, sitting on the corner of his desk. "Welcome to your fourth year of Defense Against the Dark Arts. Take your seats, that's it, let's get started." He looked cheerfully around the classroom at all the familiar faces – this was his eighth year as the Defense Professor, and he'd been with each of these pupils from their first days at Hogwarts.

"Now last year, as you'll recall, we covered Dark creatures of various types, and a few examples of Dark objects. This year, we'll begin focusing on the Dark spells themselves: curses, hexes and jinxes, spells applied directly on one wizard by another. We'll start this week with the mildest of curses – though they're really not that mild, are they? – compulsions. Forcing someone to act against their will or wish." He smiled and folded his arms over his chest. "Who can tell me the most powerful such compulsion curse?"

Half a dozen eager hands shot up, and Neville again marveled at the turn his life had taken. If someone had asked him, when he'd been a fourth-year taking Defense, whether he'd ever be teaching the class – and a respected practitioner of the subject, to boot – he'd have laughed in their face. But as the leader of the D.A. in his seventh year... as the man who'd summoned Gryffindor's sword to destroy the last Horcrux... he was respected, even liked, by his students, and he couldn't be happier.

He fleetingly wondered, as he nodded to a volunteer, if they'd respect him as much if he weren't teaching a "sexy" course like

Defense Against the Dark Arts. If he were teaching, oh, say, Herbology...

"The Imperius Curse?"

"Yes, one of the Unforgivables. It's the best known of the compulsion spells, and certainly the Darkest – but not the only one. Muggle-Repelling Charms, Notice-Me-Not charms: they could be called milder forms of compulsion, wouldn't you say?" One of the girls had kept her hand raised. "A question, Miss Vincent?"

"Professor, what about love spells, or potions? Are they Dark magic? And, well, there are magical creatures that can force a person to like them... if that's done against their will, does that make them Dark creatures?" Miss Vincent was pointedly not looking at Miss Weasley as she asked the question. For that matter, it seemed the entire class was looking everywhere except at Miss Weasley as they waited for him to reply.

Miss Weasley, for her part, was looking fixedly straight ahead, with the shuttered look that meant she was trying not to explode – either in tears or in anger. Neville sighed and looked Miss Vincent in the eye. "You're probably referring to the Persian slinkfur. It's true, the slinkfur loves to be petted, and sends psychic 'pleasure' signals to anyone who approaches. But such creatures are no more Dark than, say, the Cheering Charm you learned in your second year... and for the same reason. Would anyone care to guess what that is?"

He paused just long enough, then answered himself. "Because such magic may influence how a person feels, but it can't dictate how the person acts. They aren't really compulsions, strictly speaking. Even under the strongest love potion, a person can control his actions – if he's got anything resembling a spine." This last part was delivered without a trace of a smile, and he took some satisfaction as Miss Vincent shrank down slightly into her seat.

Neville decided the point was made, and continued with his lecture. "Not all compulsions are necessarily Dark, mind you. Those entered with the willing consent of both parties, for instance – starting with the Unbreakable Vow. Powerful, yes, and dangerous, certainly – but not Dark. Somewhat less severe are magically binding contracts, wizards' oaths, and the like, where the parties' own magic is used to

constrain their actions." He paused, and looked speculatively over his class. "Um. Are you old enough?" he wondered out loud.

Several of the boys sat up straighter, as though to make themselves taller and therefore 'old enough'.

"Yeah, I'd say so." His smile returned. "May I assume that some of you have entertained... daydreams... about being married someday?" He held up his hands in mock terror. "No, don't tell me! I don't want to know!"

It got some "eww's" and some laughter, as it often did. And Neville noted that it brought a blush to the cheeks of two or three witches, as it also often did.

"Well," he went on, "that's an example of magical oaths. When a couple says their marriage vows, it's magically binding on them – the Muggle concept of 'divorce' has no basis in the wizarding world. It really is 'bonded for life'... your own magic will see to that." He gave a reassuring shrug. "Of course, that same magic usually serves to keep people from marrying the wrong person – it's easy to see if one's magic is incompatible with someone else's. So relax." He paused, and couldn't help adding in his mind: As I myself found out, in the nick of time. Aloud he added, "Besides, none of you are that old enough yet."

The class laughed again, and Neville was pleased to see that Miss Weasley had joined in, her earlier angst forgotten. Neville fancied the young Veela would have no more trouble, on that point at least. "But back to Dark compulsions. Who here can tell me about the Ironbound Book of Skelos?"

"You know," said Ron, "no matter how rotten a week I've had, I can always count on your sunny disposition to cheer me up."

Draco Malfoy stared balefully at Ron from the other side of Azkaban's visiting room. It was, perhaps, the only room in Azkaban that made a pretense of interior decoration... only a pretense, though, a splash of abstract colors in a frame, hung crookedly on one wall. It was certainly more for the benefit of the visitors than the inmates.

"Go to hell." Malfoy's voice was hoarse and scratchy. His complexion, which had always been pale, was now an unhealthy white – except for the bags under his eyes, which were almost black.

"Sorry, I'm only a visitor here." Ron reached into his rucksack and pulled out two butterbeers. "But come on... have a drink with me. You know, for old time's sake." He opened the bottles and set one on the small table next to his chair: the table flexed its legs and walked across the room, stopping next to Malfoy's chair. Malfoy eyed the bottle but made no move to take it.

"It's not poisoned," Ron said encouragingly.

"No. I couldn't be so lucky." Malfoy snatched up the bottle and drank deeply from it.

"Got some pasties in here, too," Ron offered. "As good as they used to serve at Hogwarts – remember those golden days? Oh, now, don't be such a sourpuss. Pasties have got to be better than whatever gruel you usually get. 'Course, whatever you used to feed your house-elves is probably better, too..."

Malfoy drained the bottle. "Weasel, the dementors are bad enough. I shouldn't have to put up with your torture, too."

"Why, Malfoy, what a coincidence. I said that about you for years." Ron smiled beatifically. "The difference is, now you do have to... and I don't."

"Damn you!" Malfoy screamed, and raised the bottle as though he were going to hurl it at Ron's head. Instead, he checked himself and delicately set the bottle back on the table. When he spoke again, he'd regained some control, but his voice throbbed with rage. "Why the hell do you come here? To see me rotting away? As some kind of sick, petty revenge?"

Ron leaned back in his chair. "Oh, gee, let's see. If all you ever did to me was go on about my family and how poor we were compared to yours... well, that'd be sick, petty revenge. But..." He started counting on his fingers. "Spiking that mead I drank. Letting Death Eaters into Hogwarts. Trying to kill Dumbledore. Nearly killing us. Your wonderful hospitality at Malfoy Manor. Attacking us in the

Room of Lost Things." He grinned at Malfoy. "Naw, I'd say this is healthy, well-deserved revenge."

"Don't you understand? I had no choice—"

"And Harry even saved your life at that last one. Your thug fried the Room with Fiendfyre, and he still flew in and saved your whiny arse. Heck, if Harry'd lived, he probably would have tried to keep you out of Azkaban... that's the sort of bloke he was, always giving people another chance." Ron's grin had turned feral, and its message was clear: But I'm not Harry.

They glared at one another across the visiting room. Malfoy was the first to break the eye contact. "Guard!"

Ron raised his eyebrows. "You prefer the comfort of your cell?"

"Over sitting here watching you gloat? Damn straight. I've got better things to do." Malfoy stood defiantly as the door opened to admit one of Azkaban's human guards. "Weasel, my actions may have put me here. I've made my own hell. I admit it." He smirked, almost the same smooth smirk he'd worn as a Prefect and member of the Inquisitorial Squad. "But so have you, Weasel. The difference is, I'll admit it... and you won't."

Ron lowered his brows. "What the hell are you talking about...?"

Malfoy cut him off, and the malice fairly danced in his voice. "Heroic Ronald Weasley! Got the fame, got the girl, got everything he'd always wanted – and doesn't even have to stand in the Boy Wonder's shadow any more." The smirk broadened. "And then it all fell apart. Sucks, doesn't it? God, how you must hate your life."

He walked out of the room with his head high, as though the guard were escorting royalty instead of a prisoner. And as Ron watched him leave, his face changed from puzzlement to despair, before settling on anger.

It was another sleepless night for Harry. They'd been common, almost routine, in his first year of exile, but it had been months since he'd had a night this bad. Frequently, such sleepless nights were spent recalling his past, the friends and loved ones the Hallows had forced him to give up... recalled with a vague, unsettled feeling that

never identified itself. Distantly, he wondered if he should be worried by it.

After several hours of staring at the dark ceiling, Harry decided that he might as well get some use out of insomnia. He rose from his bed, slipped out of his room and headed for the front desk.

He'd discovered that, after midnight – if no guests arrived to require attention – the inn's night clerk would retire to a cot in the manager's office. Harry had taken advantage of this, and of the Stealth Cloak, to use the computer at the front desk in the small hours of the morning.

A quick glance showed that the clerk was down for the night. He took a seat in front of the computer and, with a few keystrokes, logged onto the clerk's Internet account. He wasn't nearly as expert with computers as Ted Lupin, but he could browse the Net well enough for his purposes. Two purposes, mostly.

I can't go back to being a chef, he thought with some regret. Not even under another name: Jacob Clayman's style was far too distinctive. It was my own fault: I needed the job, they asked for a demonstration, and I had to give myself an "edge". A few well-chosen magical spices, and voilà. And of course, once I had the job, I had to keep on with the spices... it was only a matter of time before some wizard noticed. And also of course, it had to be Tori Weasley. I don't dare assume she hasn't told Herm... um, anyone.

So no haute cuisine for me anymore. Mmm, gardening? Lawn maintenance? God knows I've years of practice...

At the moment, there were no online listings for job opportunities in gardening. Harry considered using his savings to start a small lawn care business of his own... once it was safe to come out from under the Cloak. In the meantime, he brought up websites that summarized local news and police logs, in pursuit of his other purpose: looking for those who needed help – who he was able to help.

It's not as though I could end world hunger or stop a war, he reflected wryly. A couple of times, I've been lucky enough to be on the scene of a disaster – but I can't avert calamities on a regular basis. I'm not Superman – he at least had super-hearing. By the

time I hear about a disaster, it's usually too late. But I can help scam victims, or accident victims...

He stiffened as one police report caught his eye. Or victims of abuse...

The report took only moments to scan. Domestic disturbance... constables called twice in one week... husband appeared drunk both times... wife refused to file charges, claiming all was well... Harry couldn't be completely sure, since the police report wouldn't give the most important details... but a clandestine visit to the house would soon show him the truth of the situation.

And then, perhaps, a little behavior modification, courtesy of the Elder Wand.

Not Superman, no, he decided with a grim smile, as he logged off the computer. But maybe Simon Templar.

V: The Day The Universe Changed

"Dearly beloved," intoned the Officiant, the tufty-haired wizard who'd presided over Bill and Fleur's wedding, "we are gathered together here in the sight of God, and in the face of this congregation, to join together this Man and this Woman in holy Matrimony..." He was staying with the C of E ceremony, at the request of the bride's parents, and Hermione felt a thrill as she heard the familiar words course over her. She squeezed her bridegroom's hand, and smiled broadly as Ron squeezed her hand in return.

Now the Officiant had come to the most dreaded line in the marriage ceremony. "Therefore if any man can shew any just cause, why these two may not lawfully be joined together, let him now speak, or else hereafter forever hold his peace."

Hermione turned her head, ostensibly to face Ron, but in reality to survey the crowd out of the corner of her eye. She could think of at least three people who might find it amusing to ominously clear their throat at this point, or shyly raise a hand – George Weasley being foremost on the list – and she was determined to glare each into submission before the thought even crossed their minds.

But no one even pretended to raise an objection – they were all too happy for the lucky couple. Hermione brought her attention back to her fiancé Ron, and his best man Neville. Both were watching her, one with affection, the other with amusement, as though both had guessed what was going through her mind.

And then someone did clear his throat. "Er... well..."

It was the Officiant! Horrified, she turned to face him, only to find it was no longer the tufty-haired wizard – it was Harry. He looked from Ron to Hermione apologetically. "I'm sorry, guys, but I had to live with your rows for too many years. And I mean, face it, the things that interest each of you bore the other to tears! Are you sure you aren't, y'know, rushing into this?"

He stepped between them, forcing them to let go their clasped hands, and faced Ron. "Mate, her working habits drive you crazy, and she'll always be pushing you more than you like. Plus, in a few years, she's going to be a force to be reckoned with at the Ministry.

Are you sure you want to spend the rest of your life being known only as 'Hermione Granger's husband'?"

He turned to face Hermione. "Luv, he'll always prefer the easy road and the quick fix, and he'll try to get you to slow down more than you like. In a few years, he'll be an easy-going bloke while you'll have worked yourself to a frazzle – are you sure you want to spend the rest of your life frustrated that he's not trying to do the same?"

She wanted to argue, she wanted to refute his words – she wanted to list, categorically, all the wonderful, happy things she and Ron shared in common...

But the thing she and Ron shared in common... was standing between them.

Hermione woke up with a gasp.

She spent a moment lying motionless in her bed... the bed in which, despite all the years of separation, she still slept on the side away from the window. Hermione didn't usually have dreams like this one, or at least, she didn't remember them on waking. Now she remembered the vision with painful clarity, clarity that left an ache in her breast, somewhere deep where she couldn't dismiss it.

For the dream had been a lie, an awful lie sent solely to torment her. After all, Harry had not interrupted her wedding to Ron and told them to call it off. Harry hadn't been there.

Harry was dead.

He had been dead fifteen years. Four months. And, since it was now just before dawn, nine days.

And by this time, she occasionally had days when she did not miss him terribly. Such days were rare, and she felt guilty the day after.

Things would have been different, she was sure... so different... if Harry had lived.

Perhaps he would have been a moderating influence on Hermione and Ron: keeping their squabbles mild, intervening when necessary. They might have dated longer, had a chance to grow more used to

one another, married later. (Of course, at the same time, Harry might have continued to date Ginny... but if her actual behavior after his death was any indication, they would probably have split up quickly.)

Yes... Harry would have come with Hermione to finish their seventh year at Hogwarts. Harry would have supported her as she strove to rise in the Ministry, where she could make a difference for all magical races. Harry would...

...wouldn't have left her, any more than she had never left him.

She seized one of the pillows and hugged it tightly to her chest as she curled over on her side. Maybe if she hugged it hard enough, it would dull the ache that throbbed there and refused to die for five thousand, six hundred and eleven days.

Today she couldn't quite keep her eyes off the resplendent Potter Memorial as she made her way through the atrium, but she only spared it a brief glance. No one in the lift seemed inclined to engage her in small talk, for which she was thankful. She arrived at her office to find Sheryl chatting with Dennis Creevey. Dennis looked up as she entered. "G'morning, Hermione. I have an update on our Mr. Clayman..."

"Ah. Give me a moment, then, and we'll review what you've got." She entered her chambers... and stopped abruptly. "Canby, what are you doing here?"

Canby was an elf, a free elf, who had come to Hermione some years before and begged for employment. (He would never say, but Hermione always suspected he'd belonged to a borderline Dark family who'd fallen on hard times following Voldemort's fall.) Hermione would not hire Canby for her household, but she'd made sure the Wizengamot legal staff hired him for clerical work. Since then, he'd proven his worth many times over... but never more so than during the investigation for the Swivingham case.

He stood now in Hermione's chambers, wearing a sleeveless tabard of the style that all well-dressed house-elves wore these days, and an expression of mortification.

"Forgive Canby, Miss Hermione," said the elf, "but we're having a problem with the... the witnesses."

"Problem?" asked Hermione in alarm.

He nodded regretfully and delivered the bad news. "They... they are refusing to testify."

"WHAT!" The elf winced at Hermione's sharp tone, and she immediately softened it. "But... but they can't refuse, Canby! Their testimony is key to our entire case!"

"Hermione?" Dennis and Sheryl come to the door in response to her shout. She looked stricken, while he looked confused. "Hermione, what's the problem?"

She whirled to face him. "Dennis, you must've heard we've been pursuing Jack Swivingham for months now. You know who I'm talking about?"

"Well, yeah, they say he's been running the sleaze that's been cropping up in Knockturn Alley. They say he's got his hand in all sorts of dodgy pies: drugs, muscle-for-hire..."

"And the sex trade." Hermione glanced at Canby, but thankfully the elf was showing no sign of punishing himself. "Only he's not a procurer of witches. He procures female elves."

"Oh, Merlin! I hadn't heard that." Dennis looked properly shocked... if anything, slightly nauseous. "Sex with house-elves? And he... he actually found customers?"

"You're such a naïf, Dennis," snorted Sheryl. "There's no activity so slimy that some men won't pay good Galleons for it."

Dennis blushed, but he kept his eyes on Hermione. She could see the wheels turning in his head, and waited to see if he reached the right conclusion.

"You're prosecuting Swivingham under the prostitution laws," he said slowly. "But historically, those laws didn't apply when the sex-slave was... literally a slave. Chattel. Property. The laws only applied in cases of involuntary indenture or..." He stopped, and an

admiring smile spread over his face. "So if you could convict Swivingham of organized prostitution, you'd set the legal precedent that the elves were..."

"Were free beings by right, whose freedom was unjustly stolen." Hermione nodded, impressed. "Very good, Dennis. A fair few of our upper management still haven't sussed that out." She paused and scowled. "But evidently someone has. The 'depositions' last week... I doubt now they were any such thing. They were an excuse for intimidating witnesses."

"The girls... uh, elves in question?"

Hermione nodded curtly as she turned to Canby. "Canby, we need to schedule a counter-deposition for those witnesses, at once. I believe we're allowed that, by the rules of the court."

"We can schedule, and we can summon," said Canby doubtfully. "But they will not talk, Miss Hermione. They would not even tell Canby why they will not talk, although Canby can guess." He looked steadily into Hermione's face. "Loyalty to masters. Desire to please masters. House-elves keep masters' secrets, even after leaving service."

"Not always," responded Hermione. "I can think of one exception... hmm." She paced a moment, lost in thought, before she looked up again. "An idea. Sheryl, please send an owl to Shell Cottage, and ask Fleur if I can bring some guests to Dobbywatch today."

She was sure she must present an unusual sight, even to Fleur Weasley, who had seen many unusual sights in her life. Hermione walked up the flagstone path to the front door of Shell Cottage, with half a dozen elves around her huddling close to one another... and, as they drew nearer the door, to her as well. They were all female, and young by elven standards – but their ears, noses, and other features were less pronounced than for many of their kind, which by human standards made them, well, not unattractive. They kept glancing nervously, furtively, around them, and hunched down as though afraid of being noticed.

Fleur opened the door before Hermione could knock. "Bonjour, Hermione! I'm glad you could come... we've missed you." She gave

Hermione a Continental peck on each cheek before stepping back and smiling at her entourage. "And I see you brought...?"

"These are Whimsy, Briony, Sylph, Brillig, Fatima, and Chalice," Hermione introduced them, lightly touching one or two of them as she did so (quickly removing her hand before they had a chance to flinch).

"Well, any friends of The Witch Who Won are welcome here," Fleur told them, and with a graceful gesture invited them into her home. Hermione followed behind, hoping her grimace had gone unnoticed... she hated, hated, hated the nickname she'd received after defeating Voldemort. Just like Ha... like Harry had hated his nickname for doing the same, years earlier.

But in this latest legal skirmish, she needed every advantage. And with the elves, she had two of them, which she again hated, but which she would be foolish to ignore: She was The Witch Who Won, and she was the best friend of the Defender of House-Elves. So Kreacher had named Harry while leading the elves in the Battle of Hogwarts, and among elves the name had stuck.

"I hope you don't mind," Fleur said in a low voice as they made their way through the house.

"The title?" Hermione shrugged. "Ce qui sera, sera..."

"Not that," Fleur put in quickly. "But I didn't know you were coming today, and... well, Arthur's here with Telly."

Hermione pursed her lips but said nothing. It probably wouldn't matter, either way... and in any case there wasn't much she could do about it at this point.

They arrived in the Cottage's back yard. The garden here was impeccably kept, courtesy of the daily visitors. On a stone bench near one end of the garden, Arthur Weasley sat with his six-year-old grandson Telemachus. (The Weasley clan was still trying to settle on a workable nickname for Percy's youngest: "Lem" and "Gus" seemed too plebian, but "Telly" was too undignified for Percy's taste. Probably why Fleur uses it, Hermione reflected.)

Two house-elves sat cross-legged on the ground in front of them, looking with rapture at the central feature of the Cottage's garden. Elves came from across Britain, across Europe, on a sort of pilgrimage to see it and tend it: probably the best-maintained grave in England. The grave: dug, not by magic, but by the sweat of Harry Potter's brow and the blisters of his hands. The headstone: personally carved by the noblest wizard in elven history, in memory of the elf he'd befriended.

Here lies Dobby, a free elf.

Many house-elves might shy away from true freedom, but they all admired the devotion and heroism shown by Dobby. If it resulted in a few more house-elves considering freedom a good thing, Bill and Fleur were perfectly willing to open their home to pilgrims. The elves, in return, tried to be considerate of their hosts, and did not come at all hours, but at pre-appointed times. Hence, Dobbywatch.

They also repaid the Weasleys' hospitality by tending the grounds. They did make the garden a lovesome thing, God wot.

Fleur now turned to her new guests. "Have you been to see Dobby before today?" she asked the closest... Brilla, it was. The house-elf shook her head, slightly less scared now.

"Who are these?" piped a new voice. Hermione turned to see Telly asking Arthur. Arthur seemed slightly befuddled, as he so often did these days.

It was Brilla who answered... she seemed to have appointed herself the spokeself for the group. "We is here to see the great Dobby. We is here as friends of The Witch Who Won."

Telly looked puzzled. "What did she win?" he asked his grandfather.

Hermione attempted to intervene, but Arthur had already begun to reply. "Everything. And then she gave it to all of us."

Arthur put his arm around Telly and hugged him close. With a wave of his other hand, he invited the attention of the assembled house-elves. "You see, many years ago, the Dark Lord ruled. He was an evil man, and those were evil times for everyone. Wizards and elves.

Some of us worked against him, but he was powerful. But it had been foretold, there was one wizard who could defeat him..."

"Harry Potter!" said all the elves in unison, excitedly.

"Yes," Arthur nodded, "Harry Potter. But what none of us knew, until it was over, was that the only way Harry Potter could defeat him... was to die. When Harry died, the Dark Lord could die. But it still took a brave, powerful witch to kill him."

Arthur was no longer seeing Telly, or the elves, or the garden. His eyes were filled with scenes from fifteen years earlier. "We were all fighting desperately," he said softly. "The last battle, and we had to win or lose everything, and we all knew it. At first we thought we were winning... centaurs, elves, giants, humans, all fighting against the Dark Lord's forces. And your grandmother... oh, she was magnificent, Telly. She killed the wicked witch. Bellatrix Lestrange. But then..." He choked, and began to weep. "Oh, Molly..."

"What, Granddad?" whispered Telly, wide-eyed and solemn.

"Then the Dark Lord killed your grandmother, Telly. And he started to kill everyone in the room. He... he was more powerful than all of us. Even after someone disarmed him, he could summon two more wands and continue the attack, and it's very hard to do magic like that, you know. But Hermione Granger..."

"Aunt Hermione?"

"Yes, Aunt Hermione. When he tried to kill her, she blocked his curse. Then she started dueling him, hitting him with spell after spell. We'd never seen anyone cast so many spells so fast, Telly! He tried to block them, and counter-attack, but she was faster than him... and her last spell broke through and hit him... and he fell to the floor, dead." Arthur smiled, but it was faint and tremulous. "And every evil thing in that room stopped fighting when they saw him dead, and they surrendered to her. To no one but her. And that, child, is why your Aunt Hermione is called The Witch Who Won."

All the elves' eyes flashed to Hermione at Arthur's words, and she felt she should say something. "I was one of those trying to stop Bellatrix before she and your grandmother dueled," she said quietly.

She fell silent, reliving the scene. She had become a true berserker in that battle, determined to kill Voldemort for Harry. The only reason she had taken on Bellatrix, in fact, was because Bellatrix stood between her and Voldemort. Looking back, she could barely believe she'd been so aggressive, so vicious, so merciless – the tiniest hesitation on Voldemort's part was all it took for her to launch her strongest Reducto straight into his heart.

Hermione knew she'd had to do it, but she took no pride in it, and she never wanted to have to do it again.

She turned her mind back to the reason she'd brought the young house-elves to Dobbywatch. "This is why we fight, Brillaig," she told the elf, aware that the others were listening to every word. "Right and justice do not win unless we fight for them. All that evil needs to win is for the good people to do nothing." She could not directly ask them to reconsider their decision to testify: witness tampering was now as proscribed in wizarding law as in Muggle law, thanks to Shacklebolt's reforms (and hers). But she could make clear what she thought was the right thing to do... what Harry and Dobby would think was right.

Feeling suddenly tired, Hermione excused herself and left the garden, returning to Shell Cottage and, with luck, a cup of tea... or something stronger.

"Well?" asked Sheryl when Hermione arrived back at her chambers.

"They still haven't said they'll testify," Hermione replied wearily, "but at least now they're considering it again. We probably won't know for sure until the moment they're on the stand. Merlin, they may not know before then." She paused and picked up note from her desk. "Dennis?"

"Said he'd come back again when you weren't so busy."

With the Swivingham trial imminent and its myriad details clamoring for attention, Hermione really felt she'd spent as much time as she could afford on a mystery wizard who cooked for Muggles. On the other hand, she was looking into the situation as a favor to Fleur, for her would-be-sleuth teenager – and Fleur had just done her a favor, by permitting her to bring six house-elves to Dobbywatch on very short notice.

"Any word on the monitors?" Hermione asked Sheryl.

Sheryl shook her head and gestured to the corner of the office, where some quills were poised over sheets of parchment. The quills could be charmed to respond to a given person: they would transcribe whatever he said, along with other details like location. One quill was busily writing words. "Swivingham hasn't said anything important... well, perhaps when his solicitor was visiting him in his cell, but we had to turn off the monitor for that. Right now he's..." She glanced at the parchment. "Singing bawdy songs to himself. Something about a hedgehog."

"Hmf. He seems pretty chipper for someone awaiting trial," Hermione muttered in disgust. She would get the elves to testify, she must! In the meantime, however, she should wrap up this minor matter so that she could concentrate on matters of greater import.

"See if Dennis is free now," Hermione sighed. Sheryl nodded and returned to her desk, where she wrote a brief note, folded it into a paper airplane, and with her wand launched it into the inter-office slipstream.

Dennis wasted no time in arriving at the Senior Counsel's office. "Thanks again for seeing me, Hermione. I know you're busy, I'll keep this brief."

"No, no, I need some details if I'm to report accurately," said Hermione, but with a smile that said that she nonetheless appreciated the offer. "I take it you returned to the restaurant?"

"Yeah, but nothing new to be gleaned there. Clayman's employee records don't give much more than his address, which we already have, and some personal data, which we have no way of verifying. None of the staff had a photograph of Clayman, either."

"You at least got a physical description?"

"I got six descriptions, from six people. Which one would you prefer?" Dennis grinned at Hermione's look of surprise. "I interviewed them separately. Each of them was very specific about Clayman's appearance – and no two agreed in all details." He reached into a pocket of his robes and pulled out a small device, a

gymbaled hoop mounted on a round handle. "No trace of Memory Charms or Obliviation, either. He must have used a very slick little Confundus charm, clean as a whistle."

"Why is he so anxious to remain anonymous?" Hermione muttered.
"Anything at his flat?"

"Yes indeed, two things – both of which point to the fact that he's a wizard. First, I went over the flat again in greater detail, and any trace of this guy is gone. Right down to hair or spit or DNA fragments. Nothing that would identify him. It would be impossible for a Muggle to do such a thorough job, so it had to be a wizard."

"So we've since concluded," commented Hermione. "And the second thing?"

Dennis's grin had turned smugly triumphant. "The fact that he doesn't really understand modern Muggle technology. His phone has Caller ID, and it retained the number of the last person to call him." He placed a slip of paper on Hermione's desk, with a phone number written on it. Hermione began to be seriously worried.

"Dennis," she said, her voice rising, "please tell me you didn't try to do a search by magic through Clayman's telephone? You know what magic does to telephone or computer networks! It took us weeks to clean up that mess with British Telecom three years ago..."

"Which is why I've spent three years cultivating contacts within BT and BT Mobile," smiled Dennis. "They think I work for New Scotland Yard. I asked them about this number, off the record of course. They wouldn't give me a lot of information, but they did verify that it's a mobile phone number... registered to one T. R. Lupin." He leaned back in his chair and watched Hermione's gobsmacked face as she processed this bombshell.

It took her a gratifyingly long moment to do so.

"Are you saying... Teddy Lupin knows this Clayman?" Hermione said at last.

Dennis shrugged. "I'm saying Teddy Lupin called Clayman's flat on the night he and the Weasley girl had dinner at the Idée Fixe.

Whether it was to warn Clayman that he'd been outed, or to get his recipe for bouillabaisse, well, that I can't really say... but I know the way to bet."

Circe, I don't remember when I've had this long a day, Hermione thought tiredly, as she arrived home. She dropped her briefcase by the front door as it closed, hung her cloak on the peg in the hall, and went to the kitchen to scrounge some dinner.

Bottlebrush, her silver tabby Kneazle, was waiting expectantly in the kitchen next to his food dish. "Yes, yes, you silly thing," murmured Hermione as she filled his dish, "you're not going to starve." She opened the icebox, brought out the makings of a salad, and began to assemble it as she reflected on her day. Her main priority, she knew, should be on finding a way to get Swivingham's house-elf sex-slaves to testify.

And yet, her thoughts kept coming back to the mysterious Jacob Clayman. Did Teddy know Clayman from someplace else? Teddy's said to be knowledgeable about Muggle computers – for a wizard, anyway – so perhaps they met online? But that doesn't tally with the other facts...

She shook her head, ate her salad without really tasting it, and returned to the living room. She Summoned her briefcase, opened it, and spread the papers on the low table in front of the sofa... glanced over them... and decided that she couldn't bear to look at them tonight. Instead, she went to one of her many bookcases and looked over her library of books. She passed over the volumes that had come from Grimmauld Place, which Harry had willed to her, and instead selected a novel by one of her favorite Muggle authors, Dorothy Sayers.

But Murder Must Advertise didn't distract her, as it usually did.

Playing with Bottlebrush didn't distract her, either.

She started three letters to Rose before giving up the task as a lost cause.

In the end, she got ready for bed, whispered "Nox" to kill the lights, and crawled under the covers. Her bad dream had disturbed last

night's sleep – she needed a full night of sleep tonight. She closed her eyes and attempted to clear her mind of all thoughts.

No such luck. Hermione's brain seemed to be on overdrive: thought and reasoning flooding through it, as they hadn't done for, well, it seemed like years. For the moment, she surrendered to the trains of logic that were using her head as a waystation.

Assume Teddy knows Clayman... the timing of the phone call and Clayman's disappearance strongly suggests it. Why didn't Teddy say anything about him to Victoire? Is he trying to hide him... or protect him?

If Teddy swung that way, I might have suspected a love affair with an older man. But from what Fleur's said, he's not only quite straight – and something of a flirt, as well – he's genuinely attached to Victoire. So he must be protecting Clayman... for some other reason. What?

Is Clayman a criminal, perhaps? If so, he's astoundingly good – we have no evidence of a crime here at all! Even the use of the magical herbs and wine in Muggle food: as long as our secrets aren't revealed, there's no law against that.

But this Clayman does seem to want to be anonymous. Perhaps he's protecting someone, someone who'd be ashamed that this powerful wizard was working as a Muggle cook....

No way of knowing. All I know is that Teddy seems to be the one doing the protecting.

It's not a lover. It's not a family member. Teddy's too close-mouthed about this for it to be a casual acquaintance. Is there a pattern to his behavior? Do I know of anyone else who's acted like this?

Hermione rolled over and tried to settle more comfortably into her pillow.

Well, there was Harry. This was exactly how Harry acted with Sirius. Fiercely protective of his...

Her eyes flew open. Of. His. Godfather.

VI: The Game Is Afoot

Ridiculous, Hermione told herself sternly. Out of the question. Not possible. One of those crazy notions that come in the middle of the night. She clenched a fist and pummeled it repeatedly into the mattress next to her.

Harry is dead. I gave the eulogy at his funeral! He can't be alive! And if he were alive, he wouldn't have needed to hide! He'd have been hailed as a hero!

Which, declared a second voice in her mind, might well have been sufficient reason for him to leave. He'd always hated his fame.

Hermione shook her head angrily, willing the second voice to be silent, and tried to return to her previous logical process. Well, it does appear that Ted is protecting Clayman the same way Harry protected Sirius. But there are other reasons, other possible relationships, besides godfather and godson. It doesn't mean Jacob Clayman –

"Jacob" and "James" are the same name in different languages, objected the second voice again. A potter is a man who works in clay.

That's my point! If Harry were alive, and he were in hiding, he wouldn't choose such an obvious alias!

Given that he once chose "Vernon Dudley" as an alias? Sure he would.

But he would have let us know he was alive! If he contacted Teddy Lupin, he would certainly have contacted me!

Unless he had no choice.

Stop it! STOP IT!

Hermione swung her legs out of bed, startling Bottlebrush, and seized random bits of clothing from her dresser. "I'll show you," she said aloud. "I'll prove it to you – I'll prove he's dead. Then you'll believe me..." She froze in mid-motion, then continued to dress

while muttering, "I'm talking to myself. I'm having an argument with myself. Oh, Merlin, this can't be good..."

Her sudden Apparation in the atrium at the Ministry of Magic would have caused quite a stir, if anyone human had been there to see it at that hour. Hermione had been in too much haste (or perhaps not awake enough) to coordinate her outfit, and her morning hair had always been dreadful – as a result, she looked rather like a younger version of Mrs. Figg.

As it was, she did startle three or four house-elves who were giving the Harry Potter Memorial a thorough polishing. No wonder it always looks so gaudy, Hermione thought grumpily as the house-elves frantically disappeared, they probably clean the damn thing every night.

For the first time in many years, she allowed herself to take a good, long look at the Memorial. The larger-than-lifesize bronze statue of Harry gazed at some faraway horizon; by its pose, it seemed to be taking a first step towards that distant destination. It stood atop a plinth of smooth black stone, with a few words carved thereon.

IN MEMORIAM: Harry James Potter. Born 31 July 1980. Died 2 May 1998. John XV:13.

No mention of the titles Harry had hated: The Boy Who Lived, The Chosen One, blah blah blah. Just a simple elegant epitaph... Hermione had seen to that.

She turned her attention to the glass case next to the statue, containing relics of Harry's life, all neatly labeled. His Quidditch robe, with "Potter" emblazoned on its back; his copy of Scamander's Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them, with Harry's "marginal notes"; photographs taken from the album Hagrid had given him.

And his wand, snapped in two – by her, accidentally, but still by her – with the pieces set end to end.

If Harry were alive, he'd be wandless, Hermione thought to herself. He wouldn't be able to perform the level of magic that this Jacob Clayman seems capable of. And that is Harry's wand, I'd recognize it anywhere.

For good measure, she raised her own wand and pointed it at the case. "Specialis Revelio," she commanded. Harry's wand shimmered momentarily, then again lay motionless in the case, unchanged.

That settles it. If there were any other magic on those wand fragments, the Revelaspell would have shown it. Hermione started to turn away from the case, then paused.

But if the Revelaspell had found nothing, she reluctantly forced herself to admit, I wouldn't have seen any change.

Her wand felt like lead as she raised it to the case again. The words had to be forced from her lips. "Finite Incantatem."

Harry's wand started to Transfigure, a very little bit, then began to revert to its previous form.

"NIHILO INCANTATEM!" she screamed at the top of her lungs.

The wand immediately Transfigured, its outlines fluidly altering, turning rougher, darker. It became a dried-up broken branch, ugly and wild. Hermione let her wand arm fall to her side as she stared at the old branch without blinking, without breathing, trying desperately to make sense of what her eyes were telling her.

At approximately the same hour of the morning, Harry Apparated into his inn room, weary but not yet sleepy. He gave a thought to the provender in his icebox, decided he wasn't really hungry, and plopped down onto the bed. He didn't bother to open his Stealth Cloak, or even turn on the lights.

That actually went better than I expected, he thought. The husband could be a jerk, now and then, but the alcohol was his real problem – he was actually a decent enough bloke when he was sober. And his wife really does love him.

I had to make sure he quit drinking, of course... and make it look like it was his own decision. I used the idea of Fred and George's Nausea Nougats, but cast it as a spell inside his mouth. And a permanent Cheering Charm on him as well, which gets triggered every time he's nice to his wife.

He smiled and put his hands behind his head. Satisfaction at having again done service to the community lasted a few minutes, until restlessness began to niggle into his mind.

It's kind of odd that I'm still not sleepy. Mmm, I suppose I could whip up a Dreamless Sleep Potion...

But on the other hand, now would be a convenient time to check again for groundskeeper jobs. Harry dithered for a minute between his vague desire for sleep – or rather, his vague discontent at not having slept – and his eventual need for money. It was the realization that he could, at the same time, check the Web to find people who needed help that got him off the bed and on his way to the inn's front desk.

It's better this way, he reminded himself. If I can help, I should... maybe I can't save the world again, but I can help this little corner of it. Not that anyone will ever know, but it's still the right thing to do. People would be proud, if they knew. Hermione would.

And hard on the heels of that thought, unbidden, came an image of Hermione at Hogwarts, beaming at him for having done something right – he didn't even remember what, it was her smile he recalled. The memory caused him to stop dead in his tracks.

Why was he thinking of Hermione now? Memories of Hermione hadn't surfaced for... well, it felt like eternity. At first, it had been painful to remember her; lately, he felt guilty it hadn't been painful. She seldom came into his thoughts these days... when she did, it was with an undefined regret that soon dissolved, along with her face, into the grey background of his mind.

It doesn't matter, he told himself firmly, before the past could intrude itself again in still greater detail. To all of them – Hermione, yes, and to Ron too – to Luna, Neville, Ginny – to all of them, I'm dead, and I have to stay dead. They'll have gone on with their lives by now. They'll have careers, got married, had kids. The last thing they need is me coming back to haunt them, like a bad rerun of Banquo's ghost.

He nodded, confirming his decision, and continued to the inn's front desk... blithely unaware of how metaphor was gradually becoming reality.

Kreacher opened the door of 12 Grimmauld Place a crack, but wouldn't admit Hermione. "Madam Granger-Weasley," he said in his gravelly voice. "My Mistress does not receive visitors at this hour."

"I don't need to see her, Kreacher," said Hermione, now acutely aware of how bizarre she must appear, "but I do need to have a look at Teddy's workshop."

"Kreacher regrets, Madam Granger-Weasley..."

"Why, Hermione!" came a new voice. "This is an unexpected pleasure. Kreacher, show her in." Kreacher immediately opened the door wide and stood at attention as Hermione entered the house. Andromeda Tonks was coming down the stairs, tying the sash of her night-robe around her waist. She and Teddy had moved into Grimmauld Place following the end of the war – after the deaths of her husband and daughter, her old home had too many sad memories.

Andromeda took in Hermione's haphazard appearance with barely a flicker of surprise. "It must be something important, to bring you here so early. Kreacher, prepare coffee for two in the drawing room... unless this is very urgent, Hermione?"

"Could you bring it to Teddy's workshop?" Hermione asked the elf. He nodded courteously and left for the kitchen, without once muttering under his breath, about Mudbloods or anything else. Hermione watched him go, as always amazed at the changes that time – or rather, Dromeda – had wrought.

Harry had willed 12 Grimmauld Place to Teddy, as his godson and the last of the House of Black. Ownership of Kreacher came with the bequest... but if Kreacher had initially been disinclined to serve Harry, as a half-blood, he was tenfold unwilling to serve Teddy Lupin, son of two half-bloods and a werewolf-metamorphmagus hybrid.

It had taken Andromeda Tonks (*née* Black) just one day to straighten Kreacher out. She had merely declaimed, in icily aristocratic tones, that the Ancient and Most Noble House of Black expected certain standards of behavior and deportment; that retainers who did not meet those standards brought shame onto the

House; and that Kreacher's services would be dispensed with unless he too met them.

Teddy might be Kreacher's owner, but Andromeda was unquestionably his Mistress.

Kreacher stood straighter these days, and no longer mumbled. He kept himself well groomed, and like Canby wore a sleeveless tabard – jet black, with the Black family crest on the left shoulder – which he insisted was livery, never clothes. The style was proving popular, even among free elves.

"Teddy's workshop, you said?" asked Andromeda, concerned now.
"He's not in any trouble, is he?"

"No, no," said Hermione hastily. Not yet, anyway, she added silently. "But I have to check something on his computer." Honesty compelled her to add with a sigh, "I suppose it could have waited until morning, but I wouldn't have been able to sleep."

Obligingly, Andromeda led Hermione through the house. Though Grimmauld Place had been cleaned up considerably in the last fifteen years, it would never be a light and airy home; Andromeda had to cast a Lumos spell as they walked down the hallway to the back door.

She stopped Hermione before opening the back door. "Remember," she warned, "no magic." Hermione nodded her understanding and slipped out the back door. She crossed the walled yard to a smaller building standing separate from Grimmauld Place. Originally a carriage house when the Place was built, it was distant enough from the main house to allow the new owner to use it as his workshop – devoted to modern Muggle technology.

At the workshop door, a sign proclaimed "NO WANDS ALLOWED – NO EXCEPTIONS" next to a rack of wand holders. Hermione obediently deposited her wand in one of the holders before opening the door. Inside she found a room similar to Arthur Weasley's shed, but pristinely neat. There were a variety of electronic toys and gadgets, but the centerpiece of the collection was a 48-cm flat screen with a wireless keyboard and mouse. Hermione sat down in front of it and turned on the power.

Oh, Teddy, no password protection? Did you really think no wizard would know how to use your little toy? That was foolish...

She checked his e-mail first: Teddy had a fair number of contacts (Muggle friends, and possibly Muggleborn wizards during the summer), but none of them were Jacob Clayman. No recent messages (even in the Deleted bin) concerning any restaurant; nothing that sounded like a meeting with anyone. If Clayman (i.e., Harry) had contacted Teddy electronically, there was no record of it here.

Next were Teddy's telephone records – Teddy evidently paid his phone and wireless bills online, using a Muggle bank account. (And how could a minor like Teddy set up an account, anyway? she wondered in passing. Another datum.) However, those records didn't list the numbers Teddy had dialed.

Bringing up Teddy's Internet connection, Hermione checked his browser history, bookmarks and favorites. There were two or three music sites, search engine sites, news sites, personal networking sites, a couple of rather, er, graphic sites (she rolled her eyes, but had to remind herself that she wasn't Teddy's guardian)... in short, what might be expected for a fifteen-year-old male. Nothing to suggest any connection to an older wizard, whatever his name.

Grasping at straws, she went to his root directory to see if there were any files or folders he'd deliberately kept out of his personal documents folder. Most were software- or system-oriented, but there was one whose anomalous name stood out: File:GA. Intrigued, she opened it.

File:GA was a folder containing numerous image files and links to websites, two or three dozen at least, going back years. The most recent, posted on the same evening as Teddy and Tori's date at the Idée Fixe, was an image file of an online news account: two children lost in the woods, given up for dead, had been miraculously recovered.

She opened another at random: it told of a family trapped in a burning building, saved by a freak rainstorm.

And here: A young widow with two small children, trying to make ends meet, saving pennies in a jar, discovered a rare coin worth thousands of pounds.

And here: A corporate embezzler, caught when his bank balance suddenly showed a ten million euro overdraft, triggering an audit.

And here, one of the earliest entries: An old woman with a rare blood type, who needed an operation, had three volunteers with the same blood type walk into the hospital and donate, on the same day. None of them could explain what had prompted them to do it. "My guardian angel must have been watching over me," the woman was reported as saying.

Hermione nodded when she read that. File:GA, she thought. File: Guardian Angel. Yeah, right. File: Saving-People-Thing would be more like it.

No jury would convict, based on this evidence – but Hermione considered herself much more intelligent than any jury. She was utterly convinced. Harry was alive and in hiding, and Teddy was protecting him. She was sure of it.

But how to prove it? And, once proven (if proven), how to find him? Did she even want to find him?

The last question answered itself at once, with a ferocity that bordered on mania. If Harry was alive, she had to find him. She had to know. After that...

Well, either Harry was dead, or he was going to wish he were.

The sky was lightening with the promise of dawn when Hermione finally left the workshop. Kreacher and Andromeda were waiting for her at the back door. Kreacher held a silver tray with a cup of coffee, a cream pitcher and a sugar bowl; Andromeda was sipping daintily from her own cup of coffee. "Did you find everything all right?" she asked.

"Yes, thanks," Hermione replied absently, taking her cup. She remained deep in thought for a few seconds. "Dromeda," she finally said, "are you busy this evening?"

Andromeda raised one eyebrow in inquiry.

"I have two interviews... no, three interviews to conduct," Hermione explained, remembering a remark from a recent owl. "As soon as I can arrange it. And for one of them – the most important one – your presence is required."

VII: Target Lock

Hermione's sleep was disturbed by a very polite but persistent owl tapping at her window. Her eyes opened to full daylight. "Merlin!" she exclaimed, looking at the clock by her bed. After returning home from Grimmauld Place, she'd only intended to kip for a couple of hours... not until almost noon!

Frantically, she jumped from her bed and opened the window. The owl landed on the bed – thank goodness it hadn't decided to perch on her bare shoulder! – and offered her the parchment in its talons. It was a note from Shacklebolt's office, requesting her to meet with him over lunch.

Of course, coming from the Minister of Magic, a "request" was as good as a direct order.

Now approaching panic, Hermione grabbed her wand and raced around her bedroom, peeling off clothing as she selected clean (and coordinated) robes for wearing to the Ministry. She leapt into the shower, performed the quickest ablutions in the history of bathing, and was drying herself with her wand even as she stepped back into the bedroom. A quick Switching Spell caused the clean robes to array themselves on her body. Hermione checked the result in the mirror, smoothed a bit of recalcitrant hair, and Apparated to the Ministry with seconds to spare.

She arrived at the Minister's office to find a table set for three. Kingsley was already seated at the head of the table. The other guest was Croaker, Head of the Department of Mysteries. He regarded her woodenly as she entered.

"Madam Granger," the Minister smiled – he didn't rise to meet her, and she would have insisted he sit if he'd tried – and with a gesture invited her to join them. Their lunch was light yet tasty: slivers of fish wokked with vegetables, served over pilaf. She and Kingsley kept up a stream of small talk, with the casual ease of two former comrades of the Order of the Phoenix. Croaker maintained his wooden silence, eating lunch with mechanical precision.

Finally, Hermione sighed and set down her fork. "What may I do for you, Mr. Croaker?"

Croaker beetled his brows. "Do for me?"

"One assumes that was the purpose of our lunch today." She looked from Croaker to Shacklebolt inquisitorily.

Shacklebolt glanced at Croaker and cleared his throat. "Yes, well, Madam Granger – that is, Hermione – we were wondering how well you knew Albus Dumbledore."

She blinked in surprise. "Well, we weren't exactly close... I can count on my fingers the number of times we spoke. Har..." It was her turn to clear her throat. Her voice was reasonably calm as she continued, "Harry was much closer to him than I was."

"And yet Dumbledore remembered you in his will."

"More as a way to evade Scrimgeour than anything else." Hermione grimaced at the memory of the late Minister. "I'm not saying Dumbledore and I didn't get along, but we weren't exactly bosom buddies."

Unexpectedly, Croaker spoke. "Did Dumbledore ever discuss Grindelwald with you?"

"Not really," Hermione replied, taken aback. "Of course, I know the story Skeeter put out in her book, years ago, about Dumbledore and Grindelwald being, well, very close. And everyone knows that Dumbledore was also the one who defeated Grindelwald in 1945... some say he killed him, but that's not true."

Croaker's eyes never left her. "No?"

"No. Voldemort killed Grindelwald, just a few months before the Battle of Hogwarts." Hermione returned Croaker's gaze. "He entered Nurmengard, where Grindelwald was imprisoned, and killed him there."

He inhaled sharply. "You're sure."

"Very sure. May I ask what this is about?"

"No." Croaker turned to Shacklebolt. "This does raise a new possibility, though I suspect the fact that Granger could give us this

information remains the most likely interpretation. If you'll excuse me..."

"Does this have something to do with that blocked door in the Department of Mysteries?"

Croaker and Shacklebolt fell silent, staring at Hermione. She gave them her small, tight smile, the one she tended to reserve for elderly males: Why yes, I am that intelligent, so kind of you to notice. "Oh come now, gentlemen. I have to walk past the Department of Mysteries every time I go to the courtrooms. And your people aren't nearly as discreet as they like to think they are."

She leaned forward in her seat. "I've just proven I can help you, even if I don't know anything about your problem. Imagine how much more help I can give if I do know about your problem." She waited expectantly.

Shacklebolt finally spoke. "Croaker? Unless, of course, you have other options you're pursuing...?" Croaker scowled at the Minister, then at Hermione. She continued to wait.

"As you say," Croaker finally admitted, "there is a blocked door in the Department... as it were. The door itself can be opened, but no one can walk through the doorway now. The block comes from the inside. We first discovered the block some weeks ago; it has resisted all attempts to break through it."

"You 'discovered' the block," Hermione pounced on the word. "Do you mean it had been there longer, and you never noticed?"

"It seems probable: that room is very seldom used."

"How much longer? Which room?"

Croaker gave a tiny, stern shake of his head. The message was clear: there were some Mysteries he would still refuse to share. "More recently," he continued, "observers could see through the door a set of runes that had appeared on... inside the room. Some of them have just been deciphered. They seemed to point to you."

"Me?" asked Hermione in surprise.

"The rune for Voldemort, and the rune for Grindelwald... in conjunction with the rune symbolizing one who kills or executes. We had thought the last referred to you, since you killed Voldemort... but now, if Voldemort did indeed kill Grindelwald, the runes may refer to that event. We'll need to contact International Cooperation, and arrange to send some Unspeakables to Nurmengard... it might be important to see what's there."

Shacklebolt nodded in agreement. "I'll talk to Kerricks. In the meantime, Hermione, thank you – I'm sure Croaker appreciates your help. And I want you to know how pleased I am with your work on the Swivingham case – a bold step forward. I assume you'll want to get back to working on that?"

It was an obvious dismissal. Hermione excused herself from the table and left Shacklebolt's office to return to her own. She did indeed have interviews to arrange... but they had nothing to do with Swivingham.

"Oooh, Captain," cooed Tori, clinging to Ted's arm in a scathing parody of some of the older-but-less-mature witches, "what a big, shiny badge you have."

"It's magic, you know," replied Ted, keeping a perfectly straight face. "If you stroke it, it..." he paused for effect, "purrs."

"Oooo-oooo-ooooh!" she squealed in three-part harmony. "Later tonight, will you... show me?"

Ted leaned closer. "I'll show you my... badge... if you'll show me your... birthmark," he murmured suavely.

They stared soulfully into each others' eyes for a few more seconds, until they could no longer keep straight faces. They burst out laughing at the same time.

"You two are so weird," said River Jordan from behind them. "D'you think you could, like, not block the door? Some of us want to eat dinner while it's still hot." The second-year managed to push Ted to one side as he stomped into the Great Hall.

"He has a point," chuckled Ted, and the two of them joined the tide of students entering the Hall for their evening meal.

"By the way," Tori remarked as they took seats at the Gryffindor table, "which of my dormmates told you about my birthmark? I want to know who ratted."

Ted's face showed surprise. "You actually have a birthmark? I was just taking the mickey."

She eyed him skeptically, but before she could say any more, Rose approached them. "Uh, hi, guys," she said, looking wistfully at the empty seat next to Ted.

Tori gave him a Look, the one that meant Be nice. Ted sighed inwardly. "Hi, Rose, have a seat. How was Defense today?"

"Okay," Rose told him, scrambling into the seat, but she still looked nervous. She lowered her voice as she reached into her bookbag. "But, um, Professor Longbottom stopped me as class ended, and he gave me a message – and asked me to give messages to you two, too." She pulled out two small scrolls, tied with red ribbons, and handed them to Ted and Tori.

Ted quickly unrolled his scroll and read it. "He wants me to meet him in the Defense classroom after dinner tonight. He doesn't say why, though..."

"Same here," said Tori, scanning her own scroll. She glanced at Rose, who nodded and held up her own scroll. "No reason given? Teddy, what have you done now?"

"Nothing! For once, my conscience is clear." He sighed aloud this time as both Tori and Rose smirked at him. "Honest."

They ate their dinners in relative serenity, despite the fact that neither Professor Longbottom nor Headmistress McGonagall were at the head table. At the appointed hour, they excused themselves from their classmates and headed for the Defense Against the Dark Arts classroom. Ted wasn't surprised to find McGonagall and Longbottom already there. He was surprised to find his Gran there, along with four of the Weasley Clan: Bill, Fleur, Ron, and Hermione. They sat in a semi-circle of chairs near the Professor's desk – facing three empty chairs that were obviously for Ted, Tori and Rose.

Mystified, the three students took their seats. Ted expected McGonagall or Longbottom to say something, but instead Hermione stood and addressed the room. "Thank you all for coming... I appreciate it, especially on such short notice. I'm here to ask a few questions of you three." She smiled at the students reassuringly. "Let me emphasize, none of you are in trouble. But you may have some information that we need, so I'll have to question you a bit."

She gestured to the seated adults. "The Headmistress and your Head of House are here in their official capacities, to make sure I don't overstep my bounds. Given that you're all minors, I've asked your parents and guardians to be present as well."

Rose looked puzzled at that, and Ron leaned forward in his seat. "She can't be here as your mum if she's here for the Ministry," he explained softly.

"Indeed," interrupted McGonagall. "Madam Granger-Weasley, are you saying this is a formal inquiry by the Ministry? If so, are we to know what it is about?"

Hermione turned to face McGonagall. "Headmistress, I'm hoping to keep this from becoming a formal inquiry. As for what this is about..." She paused, seemed to consider, then continued, "Let's hold off on that for the moment. I promise it will all be explained." Drawing a deep breath, she concluded, "But I must ask you all to keep the results of this interview confidential – absolutely confidential. Do you agree?"

The other adults looked at one another in surprise, and a hint of concern. "We'll take wizarding oaths if you'd like, Hermione," Neville began.

"No," she cut him off with a small smile, "no, Professor, that won't be necessary. After all we've been through, I trust you all." Her gaze included Ron as she spoke. "I can rely on your discretion." She waited a moment until everyone in the room had indicated their assent, then turned back to the students.

"Rose, let's start with you. Did you bring your new book with you as I asked?"

Rose nodded and dug into her bookbag. "Here," she said, holding up a small leather-bound book. "Thank you again, Mum and Dad, it's really a cool gift! I've already used it for my first Potions essay..."

Hermione accepted the book and leafed through it. "Hmm? The pages are blank. Rose, explain to us how you've 'used' it."

"Huh? I thought you knew..." Rose looked from one adult to the next in confusion. "Well, it's sort of a catalogue of all the books in the Hogwarts library. I can... I can write a subject on the first page, and the rest of the pages will show me all the books in the library on that subject."

"I never... how cool!" blurted Ted. "A search engine for the library! Does it give you the page numbers too, and quotes?"

Rose nodded, smiling at Ted's approval.

"A wonderful gift, and very thoughtful," agreed Hermione, still looking at the book's pages. "Just one problem: I didn't give it to you. Ron, did you?" Ron shook his head.

Hermione opened the book to the front flyleaf. "Mm, but there is an inscription. 'For our budding Rose'," she read, "'in hopes that it will mean less library time and more fun time. We are so proud of you!' Which we are," she added with a smile for Rose. She held the book open and showed the flyleaf to the other adults. "Anyone recognize the handwriting?"

Ron shook his head, as did the others. "Actually, it looks artificial," suggested Bill. "Like it was written by a Quick-Quotes Quill, instead of a person."

"Artificial, yes." Hermione tapped the inscription with her wand. "Specialis Revelio," she said, and then struck the inscription more forcefully. "Specialis Revelio, dammit!" She ignored the shocked looks, from the adults as much as the students, and peered at the handwriting as it started to alter, then reverted to its stylized form.

She looked again at her daughter. "How, exactly, did you receive this gift?"

"Um, it was in my trunk, on top of my stuff," said Rose. "Wrapped with a bow and everything. That's why I thought it was from you or Dad."

"Sorry, dear, I wish it were. We didn't put it there, which means... it had to have been put there by someone who handled your trunk after you left us." Hermione let her gaze rest on Ted's face. Ted blinked back, the perfect picture of puzzlement. Hermione gave it one more moment before she continued, "Unfortunately, Rose, you're a first-year, and so your luggage was separated from the other students'. Anyone might have had a chance to put something inside, while you were taking your boat ride across the lake."

She handed the book back to Rose. "Thank you, dear. I've no more questions for you. You can go back to Gryffindor Tower now."

McGonagall spoke up. "Actually, I wonder if I might examine the, er, search engine for a few days. I'd very much like to see if we could duplicate the charms that make it work... it sounds like something that would make a most welcome addition to the Hogwarts library." Her unspoken corollary, that it was an unfair advantage if only one student had access to it, was understood by all. Looking very downcast, Rose surrendered the book to her Headmistress.

"You can stay here if you like, Rose," volunteered Ron. "I reckon you've a right to know what's going on." He gave Hermione a dark look that said he'd argue the point – loudly and strongly – if she objected. She shrugged and turned back to the students.

"Victoire," she said, "would you please tell us about your bouillabaisse." Hermione noted with inner satisfaction that Ted's face went perfectly blank at those words.

Relishing the attention, Tori told what happened at the Idée Fixe on her date with Ted. "The sous-chef must have Disapparated when he heard me coming," she finished. "From that, and the elf-made wine in the soup, I concluded he must be a wizard. The waiter called him Clayman, but I'd never of a wizarding family of that name, so I deduce he must be Muggleborn, which correlates with his desire to work amongst Muggles..."

"Thank you, Victoire," said Fleur firmly. The girl subsided, but her shining eyes never left Hermione.

"Teddy, how did you come to choose that particular restaurant?" Hermione asked.

Ted shrugged slightly. "I found their website on the Internet, and they'd got a lot of very good reviews. I wanted to take Tori someplace special."

"Did you know Chef Clayman was a wizard before you made the reservations?"

"Um... well, our first hint was when Tori jumped up from the table and headed for the kitchen. I couldn't even taste anything special about the soup." He smiled at his girlfriend. "Some of us have better-trained taste buds, I guess."

"Did you know Chef Clayman?" Hermione met Ted head-on and looked him squarely in the eye. "Have you ever spoken with him?"

Ted spread his hands. "Sorry," he replied easily, "that was the first time I'd ever been to the restaurant."

"Is that a 'no'?"

He gave a sigh of long suffering at the density of the adult mind. "That would be a 'no'."

Hermione kept her gaze locked on Ted. He looked back at her, sincerity written across his features. Finally, she gave him a gentle smile. "Do you know, Mr. Lupin," she said softly, "if I didn't already know the truth, I'd have believed your every word."

She spun in place to face Andromeda Tonks. "Mrs. Tonks, as Mr. Lupin's legal guardian, I must ask your permission to administer Veritaserum." Gone were the gentle smile and soft voice: the Senior Counsel for the Wizengamot was speaking now.

"One moment, Madam Granger-Weasley!" McGonagall protested.

"Headmistress, he has just crossed the line. Everything he's said has been evasive, never directly answering the question... surely you noticed? But his last answer was an out-and-out lie." Hermione's eyes flashed with indignation and a hint of anger as she

looked from Neville to McGonagall. "I cannot permit false testimony to impede this investigation."

There was a moment of silence, broken by Neville's quiet voice. "I trust you, Hermione. As Teddy's Head of House, I concur with whatever you decide." He glanced at McGonagall, pinch-lipped but raising no objections, then looked at Andromeda. "Well?"

Andromeda sighed and nodded her permission. "You're as bad as your mother, Teddy," she added.

"I keep telling you: my name is Ted," he fumed rebelliously.

Hermione snorted. "Well then, Ted..." She reached into her pocket and brought out a vial of clear liquid. Stepping over to Neville's desk, she poured a small tumbler of water from a carafe sitting there. Carefully, she tipped three drops of Veritaserum into the water. Putting the vial back into her pocket with one hand, she offered the tumbler to Ted with the other.

He accepted it with an air of injured resignation. "If this is what it takes for you to trust me..." He poured the potion down his throat. He waited a second, regarding the adults with a cocked eyebrow that said Are you satisfied? before offering the empty tumbler back to Hermione. She reached for it...

... and as their hands touched, her hidden hand flashed out of her pocket and slapped his outstretched hand. "Ow!" he cried, dropping the tumbler. It shattered on the stone floor as everyone reacted with shock.

She gave a superior smile and showed the adults the needle she'd palmed in her hand. In dawning horror, Ted looked at it, then at his own hand, where a drop of blood had oozed from the slight puncture wound.

"Should you choose to take up criminology as a career," Hermione told Tori didactically, "you'll learn why Veritaserum isn't usually given to witnesses during a trial. It's considered untrustworthy... because you can't be sure you've dosed your witness. The defendant's lawyer, or someone in the audience, can Transfigure it into water... heavens, the witness himself can do it as he drinks, before it hits his stomach, if he's good at wandless magic."

She drew her wand and, with a murmured "Reparo," reassembled the shards of the broken tumbler.

"But..." Tori looked at Ted. "But Teddy can't do wandless magic..."

"No, but he is a full metamorphmagus. He can extrude a pouch on the inside of his throat and catch the Veritaserum in that. And we'd have all believed his testimony implicitly, because after all, we saw him drink it." Hermione gave Ted a mocking smile and laid the end of her wand against his larynx. A quick whisper, and she smacked the wand against his throat, causing him to involuntarily gulp.

"Oh, what a shame, Mr. Lupin," she continued. "Now you've had a double dose of Veritaserum." She waited a moment, until his eyes turned slightly glassy. Then she leaned over him. "Your name?"

"Ted Remus Lupin," he gritted out.

She flicked a fingernail on his Captain's badge. "What position do you play on the Gryffindor Quidditch team?"

"Chaser."

"Who taught you how to use your metamorph powers to evade Veritaserum?"

Ted tried to clamp his lips together, but the truth forced itself out. "Harry Potter."

"WHAT!" cried several of the adults, but Ron's voice was the loudest. He jumped to his feet. "What, is he insane! How the hell... Are you... Is Harry really alive, then!"

"I don't know," said Ted.

"Ronald! Please take your seat and don't interrupt!" snapped Hermione. In a calmer tone, she continued, "By the way, Tori, this is another disadvantage to Veritaserum: you have to choose your questions carefully. The way Ron phrased his last question allowed Mr. Lupin to answer as he did... after all, Harry could have died since they last spoke." Hermione swept her gaze commandingly

over the others, making sure there would be no further interruptions, before turning back to Ted. "When did you last speak with Harry?"

"The night I took Tori to the Idée Fixe."

"To warn him he'd been outed as Jacob Clayman?"

"Yes."

"When did you speak to him before that?"

"During the summer... early July."

"For what purpose?"

"He had something he wanted me to give Rose."

"The 'search-engine' book?"

"Yes."

Rose had been watching Ted and Hermione during their exchange, her gaze bouncing back and forth like a tennis ball at Wimbledon. At this last admission, she did a double-take and stared at Ted with an awe that bordered on worship.

"When did he first contact you, Ted?"

"He directly contacted me the summer after my eleventh birthday. Indirectly, he'd been sending me birthday gifts in secret since I was five."

"Why all the secrecy?"

"He never told me."

"Why do you think?"

"I don't know."

"All right, then. Why did he contact you, as opposed to anyone else?"

"I'm his godson."

Hermione paused, and her expression softened slightly. "Oh, of course. A wizard's debt. He had no choice." Her face hardened again. "Where is he now?"

"On holiday."

"Where did he say he was going?"

"Switzerland. A place called Reichenbach Falls."

Everyone in the room was startled when Hermione threw back her head and laughed uproariously. "Touché, Harry!" she cried. She calmed down after a moment and added, mostly to herself, "Of course, that might be his way of telling us not to come after him..." Seeing the bewildered looks on the adults' faces, she explained, "Reichenbach Falls is where a famous hero in Muggle fiction faked his death to avoid enemies. It's a message, don't you see?"

She looked again at Ted's glazed expression. Her laughter had quite died as she asked, "Did he ever say why he felt he had to fake his death?"

"No."

"Did he give you any hints?"

Ted swallowed nervously. "When he told me I couldn't tell anyone he was alive... he said something under his breath. I couldn't hear it clearly."

"What did it sound like?"

"He said it was because... because his death was hollow. Something like that."

Hermione froze. Face pale, she stood motionless for almost a minute. "Oh, sweet Merlin," she finally whispered, "it can't be..."

"Hermione?" Fleur asked in alarm. "Hermione, what is it?"

"It's... it's..." Hermione gathered herself and turned once more to McGonagall. "Headmistress, I think we've finished with the interviews here. Could we go back to your office?"

"My office?" McGonagall was looking confused, a rare sight.

Hermione addressed the stunned adults, her manner again turning brisk. "I had some evidence before coming tonight that Harry might be alive: the wand on display in the Ministry atrium isn't his wand, it's a Transfigured twig! Tomorrow I intend to apply for an exhumation order, and confirm that the body buried in Harry's tomb is likewise a Transfigured fake."

There was a general outcry of protest from the adults at the idea of disturbing the Chosen One's tomb. This time, Neville's voice carried over the rest. "Hold on, Hermione, I was right there. I saw it... it was Harry's body, I'm absolutely sure..."

"And I was sure that was Harry's wand, Neville, but we were both wrong. There's no question in my mind but that Harry's alive right now, and in hiding. Until we can find him, I remind all of you to keep this to yourselves. Tori, Rose, would you please escort Ted back to Gryffindor Tower? He's going to need a good night's sleep before that double dose of Veritaserum finally wears off. Neville, Fleur, Bill, Ron, Dromeda, thank you again. Headmistress, we really need to go to your office."

McGonagall found herself being hustled down the corridor by a bushy-haired force of nature. Hermione seemed absolutely committed to – fixated on, obsessed by – whatever tasks lay before her. For once in her life, McGonagall was unsure what to say or do. Finally, she brought up a point that had occurred to her during Ted Lupin's questioning.

"Madam Granger..." By this point in the evening, the single name seemed more appropriate than the hyphenated surnames. "If you believe Mr. Potter is still alive, and you're intent on finding him... well, I'm surprised that you didn't ask Mr. Lupin if he had any way of contacting Mr. Potter."

A faint smile graced Hermione's lips. "No. No, I didn't, did I?"

(A/N 2: When this story was first published on Portkey, I received some criticism from readers who disliked my portrayal of Hermione in the last scene: that she was morally in the wrong for dosing Ted, that she was unsympathetic and out of character, and so on. To my new readers, I urge you to continue reading the story: many of these points are addressed in later chapters.

For now, I merely note that, if Hermione seems rather beyond reason in some of these scenes, that's because she is. That, after all, is what "obsessive" means. We have ample evidence in canon – S.P.E.W., OWLs, her preparations for the Horcrux Hunt – that Hermione can be obsessive about some things... most frequently things involving Harry. Extrapolating Hermione from the books, based on the premises of this story, I think she'd act very much this way. In any case, like any good character, she will evolve as the story progresses, so please keep reading. Thanks!)

VIII: Discovered Check

Rose Weasley's thoughts were whirling as she tugged on one of Ted's elbows. The interviews in Professor Longbottom's classroom... the revelations about Ted, and Harry Potter! Ted was actually working to protect the greatest wizard who ever lived... The Boy Who STILL Lived! And, Circe, was that her own mother? Wow, was she ever brilliant, but... wow. Rose promised herself, then and there, that she was never going to cross her Mum ever again, or even try to hide anything from her.

The Veritaserum was still causing a certain grogginess: Ted was stumbling and trailing behind the two witches. They had to help him back to Gryffindor Tower, one on either side, and it was slow going in places – particularly on the trick staircases. It allowed Rose to play back the interview in her mind.

Finally, her curiosity got the better of her. "Teddy? How do you know it's Harry Potter?"

"Mm. What do you mean, Rose?" Tori asked. She seemed distracted, as though half her mind were somewhere else.

Rose shrugged. "Well, Teddy's never seen Harry Potter, right? Really, when you think about it, this could be any wizard... saying he's Harry, talking like Harry, maybe even looking like Harry... but how would any of us know?" She tugged on Ted's arm again. "I'm kind of surprised Mum didn't ask you. So how do you know?" she asked again.

With a direct question put to him, Ted had to answer truthfully... but that didn't mean he had to answer responsively. "Things he's said. Things he's given me."

"Oh. You mean, like the book he gave me?"

"Yes."

"Why did he give me that book, Teddy?"

"I asked him to."

"You did?" Rose's heart soared. "Why?"

"To remind him of his past."

"Oh." Rose could make very little of that answer. After a moment, she went back to a previous topic. "So what did he give you, to convince you he was Harry Potter?"

"A Map."

Rose regarded Ted quizzically. "What's so special about a map?"

"He said it was from one Marauder's son to another." Ted struggled to set a brisker pace forward. He needed to shake off the effects of the Veritaserum as quickly as possible – and warn his godfather that his cover was about to be blown sky-high, just as soon as Hermione got the exhumation order from the Ministry. He had a day's grace, at most...

The trio's progress came to an abrupt halt as Tori stopped short. She gave a gasp, and her bright blue eyes widened... then narrowed dangerously. With more force than necessary, she swung Ted around to face her. Seeing her expression, he was uncomfortably reminded that Veela powers included the throwing of fireballs.

But she spoke pleasantly enough. "Rosie, you're going about it all wrong. You can't ask open-ended questions, or you're leaving him a loophole to wriggle through. No, this is how you do it..." She considered very briefly. "Teddy, are you a metamorphmagus?"

He blinked... he certainly hadn't expected anything so innocuous. "Yes," he replied readily.

"You can assume other human forms?"

"Yes."

"Even female forms?" Tori took a step closer and lowered her voice. "Anatomically correct female forms?"

Uh oh. "Yes."

"Have you ever done so in the girls' shower?"

Sweat broke out on Ted's forehead. "Yes." Please don't ask, please don't ask, please...

Tori took another step closer. He could feel her body's warmth, see the honeyed smile on her face. "Was I in the shower at the time?"

Oh shite, she figured it out. That damn birthmark... If Ted could have metamorphed his vocal cords into silly string at that moment, he would have done so – but the Veritaserum wouldn't let him. "NNnnnnnnggggggyyyyes."

With her fingertip she tenderly caressed his face, smiling sweetly all the while. She lowered her voice further, and told him in seductive, dulcet tones, "You are so dead, they'll have to bury you twice."

In the Headmistress's office, Hermione stared at the portrait of Albus Dumbledore, struggling in vain to think of a response to what it had just told her.

Professor McGonagall found it for her. "You manipulative old bastard!"

Dumbledore looked pained. "I've been guilty of many things, Minerva, but acquit me of that at least."

"You've always known Harry's Cloak was a Deathly Hallow," interjected Hermione. "And now you tell me that you hid the Resurrection Stone in the Snitch you willed to him. Making sure, of course, that he could only retrieve it when it was too late to help him. I open at the close. Yeah, right."

She strode up to the portrait and jabbed a finger at it. "And now you're saying that you also always knew that Harry was a Horcrux! Before we read his farewell message, you knew! And you always expected him to die facing Voldemort! No wonder you never taught him anything that might be useful in your lessons together... like, oh, how to fight! Sacrificial lambs aren't expected to fight!"

"My hope was that Harry himself would realize the need to be, as you put it, a sacrificial lamb," replied Dumbledore. "If he went to his death willingly, the deep magics of his mother's protection would

keep him alive. He had to die, to destroy the Horcrux within him, but it would not be a permanent death."

"No, of course not! It would only be a little, temporary death! Hardly even an inconvenience!" Hermione turned her back on the portrait and stomped away angrily.

"But if he had returned from his... temporary death," put it McGonagall, "would Potter have been able to summon the Elder Wand from Voldemort's hand? It did go flying during the battle, but we all assumed it was due to a random Expelliarmus charm..."

The portrait looked grave. "Let us hope not. Not one man in a million could safely be trusted with all three of the Deathly Hallows. I certainly could not have been... I could not even be trusted with only two of them. It's why Severus and I went to such lengths to insure that the Wand would lose its power forever."

"Saying nothing to me about it, as usual," McGonagall retorted. "And just how did you plan to accomplish this?"

"By choosing to die of my own free will, in the manner of my choosing. Had I, the Wand's master, died undefeated, killed by Severus at my own request, there would have been no successor master."

"But that didn't happen!" Hermione had spun around and was facing the portrait again. "The Wand still had plenty of power in that last battle. So somebody, somewhere, must be the Wand's master." She looked away, eyes unfocused, as she considered what she'd heard. "But... but if he didn't die... and if he chose as you did... oh my God, of course he would. And that's why..."

She drew a deep breath and looked up at McGonagall and Dumbledore. "That's why he left."

That night, Ted lay in his bed with the curtains drawn, as though he were trying to sleep – but sleep was the furthest thing from his mind. He was, after all, still fully dressed, even though in bed... and he'd brought with him the two items he'd need to warn Harry.

The evening had been painful enough. Tori had wasted no time in conferring with all the other Gryffindor girls, who sent many a furious

glare in his direction. Now every single one of them was giving him a shoulder so cold it could freeze the fire in the fireplace. Even Rose was refusing to speak to him... as though he'd even be in the first years' shower! Geez, did they think he was some kind of pervert?

He'd scrupulously limited himself strictly to fourth years and above. Not that anyone seemed to appreciate it.

The one silver lining in the toxic waste dump that was his current life was that Tori and Rose had kept his Veritaserum dosage a secret. All the girls, mindful of his "offense" (Ted's thoughts insisted on the quotes), would have taken advantage of his current state to ask all sorts of incriminating questions, if they'd known. And the guys, if they'd known, would have been curious to learn all the details of the girls he had seen in the showers. Not that Tori hadn't cowed them into shunning him tonight, too.

Ted had no doubt that, within a day or two, he'd be experiencing a much more... palpable... retribution as well. He couldn't suppress a shudder at the thought.

If you're ever taken captive, don't let them give you to the Veela.

Snores from the fifth-year boys' dormitory were beginning to compete with one another. Cautiously, Ted opened his curtains a crack and peeked out. No one looked awake; no one was suspiciously motionless in pretended sleep, either. Silently Ted emerged from his bed and crept to the window, the two items in his hands. He opened the window wide, checked his dormmates again to insure they still slept, then stepped onto the windowsill.

In one hand he held his mobile phone; in the other, his Levinbrand, that worthy successor to the Firebolt. Ted mounted the broom and jumped off the windowsill into the midnight sky.

And headed straight up.

People always accuse me of breaking the rules, he thought with a mental grin, when all I really do is test their limits. Well, usually...

The phone, like any advanced electronic device, wouldn't function at Hogwarts at all: even if there were no active magic being practiced near it, there was simply too much ambient magic in the castle itself.

If he tried to use his phone anywhere around the school, its circuits would fry. And if he left the school grounds, of course, he'd be detected at once – and probably given several detentions.

But if he flew high enough, he could get far enough away from the castle to allow the phone to work – while technically never crossing the boundaries of the grounds. The big question now was, how high was "high enough"?

And he dared not make a mistake, and ruin the phone. He had to warn Harry – and he'd only get one chance.

So upward he flew, until he could see the lake and the forest shrunken at his feet, until the chill of the air began to be painful. Ted remembered another trick he'd learned: he metamorphed his lungs, enlarging them like those of Himalayan sherpas or the natives of Peru. He continued to breathe normally now, even at his current altitude. (What was it, a mile? Mile and a half? He shouldn't go too high, or he'd have no signal strength.)

He had to risk it. Cautiously, he turned on the phone's power. It seemed to be all right, which was a good sign. He dialed the number Harry had given him... listened to the ringing on the other end.

For emergency use only, he reminded himself. Well, this certainly qualifies.

Ringing. Ringing. Still ringing. Harry, please, for your own sake, wake up and answer the phone!

Motionless. Perfectly motionless, Harry sat on the edge of his bed, "listening". It was the only analogy he had for the extension of subtle senses no human could fully appreciate or understand. He didn't understand them himself; he only knew what they told him.

Somewhere very close, someone was dying.

It was a relatively peaceful death, a gentle departure for an elderly man. A slowing of the heartbeat, in sleep. He was... he was in one of the rooms here at the inn. Very close to Harry. Very close to death.

Moments like this served to remind Harry that the two were not one and the same. The moments had been rare, in the years since he'd acquired the Deathly Hallows, but they'd happened often enough for him to know what was happening. Death was at work, and Harry must not interfere.

He could neither speed the old man's passage, nor prevent it. And he knew better than to try.

There. Harry felt it brush over him and through him, soft as down feathers, colder than interstellar space. The departing soul, journeying to... Harry couldn't say. He'd always felt as though the soul should be traveling up or down, but no: it passed through, like a bird winging through the empty sky. The idea diminished him, in some nebulous way.

He shivered slightly. Death could not find Harry, wrapped as he was in the Cloak – as he always was, these days – but its presence was always disquieting. Whenever he sensed someone nearby succumbing to Death's touch, Harry took care to remain alert, quiet, and inconspicuous.

So when his mobile phone on the dresser began to warble, he was understandably startled.

Probably the manager of the restaurant, wondering when I'll be returning, he thought, returning to the mundane. He rose from the bed and stepped to the dresser. He's just about the only person who'd be calling me... who even has my mobile number...

But as he picked up the phone, the display showed an entirely different number: one given him by his godson less than a fortnight earlier.

Hurriedly, Harry peeled the Cloak away from his head and neck so that his voice could escape. He accepted the call. "Hello? Ted, is that you?"

"Harry! Thank Merlin you're awake!"

Harry didn't bother to mention that he hadn't been sleeping. "Ted, I'm warning you, if this is about one of your pranks gone wrong, or anything less than the direst..."

Ted interrupted him. "She knows!"

Harry paused. "Who knows, Ted?"

"Hermione knows! Everything! She came to Hogwarts tonight and I had to take Veritaserum and she made me tell her that you were still alive...!"

Harry started to speak, but Ted overrode him. "And yes, I tried the trick you showed me with the pouch in my throat, but she knew about that too! And she said she was going to dig up your body tomorrow and show it wasn't your body, which would prove it to everybody!"

"All right, Ted, calm down," ordered Harry, knowing now he had to wrap up the conversation quickly. He glanced around the room at the few of his belongings he'd unpacked – he didn't want to abandon them if he didn't have to, but he couldn't use magic to Reduce them for transport until the phone was safely turned off.

"What's done is done," he went on. "I don't blame you, so don't you blame yourself. If Hermione dosed you with Veritaserum, you really had no choice."

"But... but..." Ted sounded distraught. "But they know! McGonagall, and Longbottom, and Tori's parents, and Gran! How'm I supposed to explain to Gran that I was spending summers with..."

"With your godfather," Harry finished firmly. "Just tell her the truth, Teddy. It won't matter: they still won't find me. I'm afraid this means I won't be contacting you at Christmas after all... and I don't know when I'll see you again."

Now Ted sounded positively wretched. "But... I'll still be able to call you, won't I, Harry? I mean, if something else happens? If I take precautions and everything...?"

"Ted, I plan to ditch this phone the moment we hang up. So I really have to get going..."

"Wait, hold on, Harry, it'll be okay. We can still talk, really. I told you, magic can't track through phones or the Internet, right? It's

impossible – the magic crashes the system. I mean, you must've learned that at Hogwarts, same as I did..."

"Ted," Harry said with emphasis, "if I learned anything at Hogwarts, it was to never underestimate Hermione Granger!"

"And yet somehow," came a hard, cold voice from behind him, "you keep doing it."

The bottom dropped out of Harry's stomach. Slowly, not hearing the buzz of static from the now defunct phone, he turned in place. Hermione was standing at the foot of his bed, her face a mask carved from furious stone, her wand's glowing tip pointed right at his head.

Fifteen years of exile had just been thrown out the window. His two worst fears were now realized: Hermione Granger had found Harry Potter – and the Master of the Deathly Hallows was being held helpless at wandpoint.

IX: Flint and Steel

He stood unmoving and watched her eyes closely as they took in the sight of him, from his disembodied head – all that could be seen of him, with the Cloak covering the rest of his form – to the phone seemingly floating in mid-air. Her wand never wavered: it stayed pointed right at him.

The eyes came back to look directly into his own. Harry had never suspected that brown eyes could blaze, but he knew better now. He remained in place, like a stag at bay, watching for signs of an imminent attack.

"So," Hermione finally said in a tight, controlled voice, "you are alive."

If she was talking instead of jinxing, he had a chance. He gestured with the dead phone. "How did you find me? I thought magic couldn't... through phones..."

She snorted. "I expected Ted to try and warn you, so I put a transcribing spell on him tonight – the one we use at the Ministry to monitor what prisoners say, and their location. Lo and behold, it started reporting his voice at Hogwarts and in Manchester. After that, it was a simple step to... to..." A puzzled look flitted across Hermione's face... then her eyes rolled upwards into her head and she began to collapse to the floor.

Harry was instantly beside her, tossing away the phone to get one arm around her waist, while the other plucked her wand from her limp hand. He got her to the bed and gently lowered her onto it. For some reason, it didn't occur to him to levitate her.

"And yet somehow, you seem to underestimate me, too," he murmured.

Using the Elder Wand for fifteen years had taught Harry a fair bit about raw magic. In particular, he'd discovered that the lessons taught at Hogwarts were based on, or at least reinforced, a fallacy: the idea that wand motions were important. Maybe they were important for first-years, like pronunciation was. But just as spells could be performed voicelessly, or even wandlessly, they could be performed with a wand – but without wand motions.

Such as the Somnius Spell he'd just cast, using the Elder Wand strapped to his forearm, without a single word or gesture.

He turned away from the bed and began to Reduce and re-pack his belongings. It made a good excuse to avoid thinking about what he had to do next. But actually, he told himself, that decision was made fifteen years ago. I did think it would be easier on everyone if they thought I was dead... but it doesn't matter if they know I'm alive, so long as they can't find me. If I can't be found, I can't be fought.

It's time to leave England, looks like. Should've left years ago – I've only stayed here because of my commitments to Ted. But he's almost of age now, and I can complete my godfatherly duties from abroad if need be. Probably not Europe, it's too near, and too magically populated. Canada, maybe.

Just as it hadn't occurred to Harry to levitate her, it didn't even cross his mind to Obliviate her. If it had, he might have justified not doing it by the fact that she wasn't the only person Ted had named as knowing he might be alive – but in truth, the idea of Obliviating Hermione was literally unthinkable.

I wish I didn't have to blindside her like that, but she didn't leave me much choice. At least I could disarm her with a minimum of fuss. I'll be sure to leave her wand next to her, where she can find it, before I...

He paused, then resolutely completed the thought. Before I leave again.

Harry pulled the Cloak's hood back up, letting it remold itself over his head, as he turned for one final look at Hermione. It was the first time he'd looked at her that evening, really looked – and it was the first he'd seen of Hermione since the Battle of Hogwarts. Then, she'd been an adolescent witch, her face streaked with sweat and grime, robes torn and dirty and burnt in places, adrenaline and fatigue competing in her voice. When thoughts of Hermione had come to haunt him in years past, that image was the one that came most often.

He was therefore unprepared for the Hermione he now saw: a witch in her full flower of womanhood, no longer slim awkwardness but

lithe grace, with features glowing in beauty even as they showed the signs of confidence and competence.

All cognitive processes crawled and came to a halt. He couldn't stop looking at her.

He knew it was imperative that he leave at once, but he could not stop looking at her.

Leaving them all back then, when they all thought I was already dead – that would save them from pain, that made sense, that felt right, he finally told himself. Leaving her again now, when she knows I'm alive – that would only be convenient.

And though you may have forgotten the fact, Harry old son, the Hat did put you in Gryffindor.

After a long, long moment, he sat down on the edge of the bed. Reluctantly, he pulled back the Cloak's hood to expose his head again. He examined Hermione's wand, still in his hand, and yielded to a whim: He pointed it at her unconscious form and said softly, "Rennervate."

The spell flashed from the wand's tip into Hermione's body, as he felt sure it would. Not that it means her wand is mine now... I've always been able to use her wand. He watched carefully as she gave a small moan, then opened her eyes. They flicked around the room, settling on his head.

Her expressionless mask immediately slammed back into place. "I would have expected you to be long gone by now," she said coldly.

Well, now that it's known I'm alive, there doesn't seem to be much point in hiding away and faking my death anymore, were the words Harry intended to say.

"It hurt too much to leave you the first time. I couldn't do it again," is what he said instead, to his vast surprise.

Hermione's eyes went wide. She struggled into a sitting position on the bed and reached for her wand, still in Harry's right hand. Reflexively Harry offered it to her... and as he was thus occupied, her own right fist shot out, connecting squarely with his face.

He tumbled backwards off the bed, bleeding from the mouth, and looked up from the floor to see Hermione standing over him in what might charitably be described as a towering fury. "It hurt YOU too much!" she screamed. "Hurt YOU? God DAMN you, Harry Potter, you LEFT me!"

"Er, yeah," Harry said, scrambling backwards on his hands and buttocks until his back was against the dresser. "But I had to, honest. I had to leave the wizarding world, Hermione – at the end, let me explain, at the end of that battle I had all of the..."

"I know about the Hallows, dammit!" she shouted. "Dumbledore's portrait finally got around to telling me all about them. I know you had the Ring and the Cloak, and I figured out you'd summoned the Wand, and I know that's why you felt you had to leave. I'm not talking about that!" She spun away from him, hugging her arms tightly around her torso.

He got to his feet carefully, watching her. He brought one hand to his bleeding mouth, but decided against healing it for the moment. "Hermione," he tried again, "I wrote the message with my will, remember? Where I explained that I was a Horcrux..."

"And that you had to die if the rest of us were to defeat Voldemort. I remember, Harry," she interrupted again. "I remember it very vividly, thank you. I'm not talking about that, either. Quite." She glowered angrily over her shoulder at him.

Harry shook his head slowly. "Then I'm sorry, but I don't understand what you..."

"You LEFT me – left US!" She'd turned to face him again, her arms uncrossed and fists clenched at her sides. His apparent lack of response seemed to inflame her own anger. "When we came back from the Shrieking Shack, and the entire castle heard Voldemort's little ultimatum. Ron and I went to his family to comfort them, remember? We thought you were right beside us, but when we looked up, you were gone. And I was worried, but Ron said oh no, you wouldn't be so stupid as to actually go to Voldemort..."

"I went to Dumbledore's office," he said calmly enough, "to use his Pensieve. For those last memories Snape gave me."

"And then you went to Voldemort," she replied, not at all calmly, "without one word of goodbye. After all we'd been through, after all we'd done together... you... you..." Her voice broke, but though words failed her, the glare was eloquent.

"You weren't to be found," he persisted. "And there was no time to look. And even if..."

"Oh, for God's sake!" Hermione suddenly erupted. "Will you please take off that damned Cloak? I feel ridiculous talking to a floating head!" The total irrelevance of her demand took Harry aback. Before he could react, she strode quickly up to him, grabbed two handfuls of Cloak, and yanked it open.

Neither of them was prepared for what happened next.

Harry drew in a great, shuddering breath, as though he'd fallen into an ice bath. His green eyes turned huge, and as Hermione watched, they brimmed and overflowed with tears. Harry began to weep uncontrollably, staggering to one side and bracing himself upright on the dresser.

Hermione watched open-mouthed as Harry continued to sob. It took her several moments to convince herself that this was not some sort of trick or ruse. "What is it, Harry?" she finally asked, keeping her voice neutral.

"The man..." Harry choked out. "Oh God, that poor man..."

"What man, Harry?" Hermione continued, in the same even voice.

"The one who just died," he wept. "I felt him die, it was like a release for him, but oh sweet Merlin... and his wife, she's still asleep next to him, how's she going to feel when she wakes up and finds him..." His hands fumbled with the edges of his Cloak, preparing to draw them closed again, and suddenly Hermione understood.

"Oh, no you don't," she snapped. She came up to his side and batted at the air near the Cloak's edges, where his still-invisible hands had to be. "Off! Take it off now!"

His eyes came up to meet hers. The dispassionate look from minutes before was long gone, replaced by an almost tangible remorse. "Hermione..." he began.

"Shut up! Take off the bloody Cloak and just shut up!" Whatever Harry was about to say, Hermione did not want said while he was in the throes of some magically induced mood swing. Instead she pulled more of the Cloak away from his body. Hermione was not to be denied: through sheer force of will she got Harry to cooperate.

Once removed from his body, the Cloak had become visible, a pearly grey in color. Hermione was certain it had been silver when last she'd seen it. Beneath the Cloak he was dressed in singlet and light trousers, which looked as though they'd been worn (and slept in) for at least a week. "How long have you been wearing this?" she demanded.

"Um? A couple of weeks, almost. Since..." Harry paused and wiped the tears from his cheeks, as he considered what to say. If she'd questioned Ted under Veritaserum, then she had to know about Jacob Clayman. "Since Ted and Victoire's dinner at the Idée Fixe."

"Every waking hour?" Hermione wrinkled her nose at his appearance. "Yes, I would think so. And before that?"

He sighed in defeat. "I've been sleeping in it for fifteen years. It guarantees no one can detect me."

"Such as the Ministry," she nodded sharply. "Well, that stops as of right now."

Harry stiffened at that. "Stops?"

"Yes, stops. Harry, I know why you thought you had to leave... but it's time to come back now."

She gave him no reason, merely stating it as an unarguable fact. If she thinks that, then she doesn't really understand why I had to leave, Harry thought. The surge of emotion had abated somewhat, and he was able to collect his wits... and recall his purpose. "As far as the Deathly Hallows are concerned, nothing's changed," he said firmly. "I can't ever let myself be defeated, or even disarmed. Which..."

"Even disarmed'? Oh!" Hermione said in quick comprehension. "That explains the unprovoked attack when I arrived!"

He couldn't help wincing. "I'm sorry about that. But you were holding a wand on me. The Hallows gave me no choice." He regarded her steadily, making no attempt to evade her gaze. "Just as I had no choice about exiling myself. I couldn't stay in the wizarding world... and I can't go back."

She said nothing at first. Harry watched as Hermione processed what he'd told her. When she spoke again, her voice was still hard, but no longer as cold: there was a trace of sadness in it now. "You're wrong, Harry. You can't stay away. You'll end up destroying yourself." She gestured at the Cloak, now lying in a tumble on the bed. "Look at what the Hallows are doing to you. The Cloak seems to actually cut you off empathically, as well as visually. I'm astonished you can still feel anything for other people."

"That's not true," he objected. "I try to help people all the time..."

"Anyone else would have stopped trying years ago," she tried not to snap. Hermione wanted to shake him by the shoulders, and force him to understand. Her anger at him burned as hot as before, but its focus was blurring: from resentment at his shabby treatment of her, to frustration at his obtuseness. The Hallows were damaging him – didn't he realize the risk he was running...?

The question answered itself: of course he did, and he didn't care. He'd long ago accepted the risk, as the only way of ridding the world of the Hallows forever.

Hermione dropped the line of argument as unproductive. She tried a different approach: making a conscious effort to soften her voice, she said, "Harry, what about all the people who care for you? You owe it to them to come back. And there's so much you can do to help, Harry... so many things that still need to be accomplished."

He squeezed his eyes shut and screwed up his face in pain. "Hermione..." he began. He hesitated, then opened his eyes and continued more firmly, "I think... I think I'm doing the greatest service I can do by eliminating the Hallows. I mean, would it make any difference to reform the wizarding world, if... if it's torn apart by

war? The last two Dark Lords have both wanted the Elder Wand – so if there is no Elder Wand, maybe there won't be a next Dark Lord. The only way to do that... is to die without passing it on. And the only way to do that... is to not be around to be challenged."

There was no response she could make to that.

With unfathomable sadness, he added, "I know people care for me, Hermione. And... and I care for them, too, more than I can say. But I've already died for the wizarding world. I mean, I didn't fake dying – I died. I don't think I can owe them more than that. I won't come back... for them."

Hermione would not let herself falter. She would not cry; she would not beg. "So you intend to stay 'dead', then?"

He raised a hand, palm outward in supplication. "Please, Hermione, don't make my 'non-death' public. I know you were planning on digging up my body to prove it's not me..."

She never thought she'd be able to laugh, but she did. "That was a spur for Teddy – excuse me, Ted – to make sure he contacted you tonight. Honestly, why would I make such a public show, right after insisting that everyone in the room keep the matter quiet?" She sobered and looked Harry in the eye. "You want me to keep your secret, Harry? I will. You want to destroy the Hallows? More power to you. You insist on destroying yourself, and dying alone, to do it? Be my guest – I can't stop you. After all, it's For The Greater Good. Just like it says at Nurmengard."

With those words, she Disapparated. Harry collapsed on the bed and covered his face with his hands. And for the second time that evening, he wept uncontrollably.

Which proved Hermione the stronger of the two: she waited until she had undressed, showered, and climbed into bed before she allowed the tears to finally flow.

X: Chinks in the Armor

One good thing about being a pariah: when a bloke needed privacy, he was sure to get it.

Ted Lupin sat in one of the plush armchairs of the Gryffindor common room. It was late; almost everyone had headed for their dorms. The few hardy souls remaining were pointedly not interested in him. For tonight, that suited him very well... he had business. Ted touched the pocket of his robe again, and felt the reassuring crackle of the note inside. It had come to him this afternoon on the Quidditch pitch, folded as an airplane, and all it said was Gryffindor fire, midnight; but that was enough for Ted.

"Ted?" He looked up to see Tori standing before him, a level look on her beautiful face. "Ted, we need to talk." Ah yes, those wonderful words every male was thrilled to hear.

"Tori, I've already said I was sorry. Repeatedly." Ted did want to have this discussion, but not right now. Right now, he needed her to leave. It was getting close to midnight...

"I know, luv, and as soon as I've exacted my revenge, I'll forgive you completely." She lowered her voice. "I mean we need to talk about your... godfather." The last word was mouthed silently.

This, on the other hand, was not a discussion he wanted to have. Ted's face went blank, a reflex based on years of training. "Everything I can say, you heard last night," he said curtly.

"Ted, what has he been doing for all these years, that he needs to have everyone think he's dead? Have you been helping him? What's he..."

He lowered his brows sternly and shook his head. "I can't talk about any of that, Tori. They aren't my secrets, and I gave my word. It was bad enough I was forced to say what I did." He looked away from her into the fire, hoping to put an end to the conversation.

"Forced by my aunt, you mean?" Curse it, why did she have to be so sympathetic and understanding all of a sudden? "Ted, I... I'm sorry about that, honest I am. I know you're upset, and you're right, it wasn't fair of her to dose you with Veritaserum..."

"That?" He snorted with bitter mirth, still looking into the fire. "Actually, that was classic pranking. Beautiful – like the Weasley Twins at their finest. I've got to admire her technique, if nothing else." Which was true, so far as it went.

"Then..." Tori sounded puzzled. "Then why are you down here so late... moping?"

"I'm not moping. I'm just... sorta persona non grata in the fifth-year dorm right now." He turned his head to look at her. "They're kind of upset that I'm not willing to share the wealth from my Adventures in Shower-land."

"What did they expect? That you'd somehow change them into metamorphmagi and bring them along?"

Ted didn't reply in words. Instead, his hair grew longer and blonder, until it was a perfect match for Tori's hair. He turned his eyes blue to match hers as well, and softened his jawline somewhat. He didn't morph further, keeping the rest of his facial features – but waiting to see how long it would take supersleuth Victoire Weasley to make the correct deduction.

Not long at all, as it turned out. "They want... they want you to model...!" she sputtered in outrage. "Me! As in... all the way...!"

"Not just you, if it's any consolation. There are three or four girls' names that keep, er, coming up."

"Euurgh! Well, then, it's a good thing you're not in the fifth-year dorm right now, because it's about to get very uncomfortable there in a couple of minutes...!"

"Oh, it's not just the fifth-years," Ted assured her. "You know Watkins, the seventh-year Prefect? He took me aside right before dinner... wanted to know if I could, ah, model Prudence Boomhalter for him." Ted morphed back to his usual appearance, though he made his hair jet black.

"Watkins?" Tori looked at him aghast... she'd liked Watkins. After a moment, her expression became quizzical, finally dissolving into a

soft smile. "So the fact that you are, as you say, persona non grata... does that mean you're not, ah...?"

He raised one eyebrow and affected an upper-crust accent. "I may be a scoundrel and a rogue, m'dear, but I am still a gentleman."

She promptly sat in his lap and gave him a hard, passionate kiss. Sadly, it was also a brief kiss: she broke away before it could develop into a full-blown snog session. Her face remained inches away from his, though, and their gazes met and locked. The soft smile continued to hover on her lips, which Ted took to be an encouraging sign. "I'm forgiven, then?"

Tori blinked for a moment in sudden confusion, then pursed her mouth in thought. "Mm, some final penance is still required. If you bring my breakfast to the common room on Saturday – we'll call it even."

Rising gracefully from his lap, she added, "Of course, I still have to decide what to do about your gonad-brained dormmates, but not tonight. I'm off to bed now, luv... don't stay up too late."

"I won't," promised Ted. He barely waited until she was headed for the stairway to her dorm before turning back to the fireplace. That had been close, very close... it was just past midnight... thank Merlin he'd distracted her...

And Harry's head appeared in the fire. Furtively, Ted glanced over his shoulder at the now-empty common room, and back to Harry. "Hi, Harry. Wow, your timing is perfect... I was afraid you'd be spotted."

Harry smiled. "By the girl? I took a trick from my own godfather: I 'flashed' my head through the fire for a quick look, to check the scene before making my appearance." He chuckled and added, "So... do you morph your tongue when you kiss her?"

"Ew," Ted began, then paused. The idea had merit...

He put the idea aside for later consideration. "Harry, are you all right? When our phone call last night cut off..."

"I'm fine," Harry said. "I'm sorry about the cut-off... some magic happened, and the phone was ruined."

"You mean Hermione managed to track you down – even through the BT phone system? Wow, she is good. No wonder your phone got zapped."

"Well, that's why I'm Flooing you tonight, to let you know I'm okay." He hesitated, then met his godson's eyes frankly. "And to emphasize again that none of this was your fault."

"I made you a promise," Ted said, falling morose again. "I should've found some way to keep it."

"Not your fault," Harry repeated.

"No... it was 'Auntie' Hermione's fault," said Ted, his resentment coming back to the fore. "She made me break my word to you – in front of witnesses. In front of Tori..."

"Ted..." Harry's voice held a note of warning.

Ted ignored it. "Her and her so-called 'interview' – 'inquisition' would be more like it. And she used me to track you down! Used me! Lousy nosey-parker... who the hell gave her the right..."

"Enough!" barked Harry. "That's enough! You do not get to criticize her!" His voice had gone well beyond warning now. Even through the Floo fire, his green eyes were cold. "Not to me."

Taken aback, Ted stammered, "I, I'm sorry, Harry. It's just... she made me betray a trust!"

"If it comes to trust, I've trusted Hermione Granger with my life. Now I'm trusting her with my secret, just as I trust you." He sighed and smiled ruefully. "I'll say it again, Ted, you didn't betray me: Veritaserum is considered, what's the word, force majeur. And Hermione won't ever betray me, either. It's okay."

Ted didn't reply immediately. "If you say so," he finally grudged.

"I do. It's one thing I'm absolutely certain about. Please... Ted, I ask this of you, as your godfather, please don't hate her."

With a sigh in return, Ted said, "Right, then... I reckon she needed to find you, no matter what." Shrewdly he added, "And she found you. How'd that go?"

"It," began Harry, and stopped. He tried again: "The thing is." After another moment, he came up with, "See, Hermione and." Ted decided it was only fair that he enjoy the spectacle of his high-horse godfather at a loss for words.

"We had... issues," Harry finally said. "It... didn't end well. But... but some things she said..." He fell silent again.

Ted waited for Harry to continue. After a minute, when Harry seemed lost in his own thoughts, Ted ventured, "At least she didn't exhume your body today..."

Harry looked up. "We don't need to worry about that," he replied. "Ted, I'll be replacing my mobile; I'll get the new number to you the same way you got my note earlier today. But I've decided..." He hesitated, then continued more diffidently, "I've decided that, in case of emergencies, Hermione needs to have it too. For emergencies," he stressed, and waited to see if Ted would challenge this. When Ted said nothing, he continued, "So I'm assuming you know where Rose lives?"

"Rose? Don't you know... oh, of course not, you wouldn't have needed me to deliver her gift if you could've done it yourself." Ted shrugged nonchalantly. "I've never been there. Really, most of my contact with the Weasley family is through Tori and her folks. I mean, it's not as though you were around to introduce me. I could ask Rose tomorrow..."

"I had to borrow someone else's Floo to contact you tonight," put in Harry, "while they're away. I won't be able to do it again tomorrow. I'll find out some other way, then..."

"Rose lives with her mum outside Wookey Hole," came a new voice. "They call their place Enthalpy House, but heaven help you if you ask what that means." Ted turned in shock to see Tori's head peeping over the back of the divan. "I'm sorry," she said fearfully, "but I saw your face in the fire and I knew Ted was going to talk to you and I know Ted can't tell me anything but..."

"You mean, while you were kissing me, you were looking at the fire...?" Ted fell speechless at this evidence of perfidy.

Harry gave Tori, or at least the top of her head, an appraising look. "You're Tori Weasley, aren't you? You heard Ted's confession yesterday under Veritaserum?" he asked her. When she nodded, he sighed and said, "Come on, then. It seems we have to enlist you."

Tori wasted no time in moving to Ted's side by the fireplace. "I swear to you, Mr. Potter, I'll take any oath you like, but I'll keep your secret safe. You must be on a very important mission, if you've had to remain in complete hiding all these years – as a Muggle, even!"

He laughed softly. "Keep the secret as well as Ted has, and that'll do. Thanks." Harry glanced at Ted and smirked. "Beauty, brains, and loyalty – this one's a keeper, lad."

Both Ted and Tori blushed bright red, but Tori didn't flinch from Harry's eye. "Why, thank you, sir, I agree. Are you paying attention to him, Ted? A man would have to be a fool to throw away all three of those."

Harry seemed to choke on something, and had to cough to clear his throat. "Yes," he managed to finally say. "Good... good point. All right, I need to be off, but you'll get the new number tomorrow, Ted. Remember, it's only for emergencies... I still expect to be gone for the foreseeable future. Good to finally meet you, Tori." With a small pop, Harry's head disappeared from the fire.

Ted looked at his girlfriend with an increased respect. "Nice parting shot, that. What was that all about...?"

"Weren't you listening?" Tori rolled her eyes. "Men." And she would say no more, despite Ted's best puppy-dog look – which, from a metamorphmagus, was rather impressive.

As the two witches made their way through the Atrium to the lift, Aurora Sinclair felt sure her co-worker would address her once they were in the lift together, alone. Zinadia had that "antsy" feel about her.

She smiled to herself as she proved herself right, the instant the doors slid shut. "I hear you're going to a Fire Party tonight."

"My second one," replied Aurora. "Good food, good music, good people – Friday nights don't get any better."

Zinadia gave a wistful smile. "Must be nice."

"Mm hmm, it is nice." Aurora lowered her voice to a more intimate level. "The nicest thing, of course, is just the chance to mingle with... well, you know, Our Own Kind. Just to be ourselves, without having to worry about politics or watching what we say... you know, relaxing and acting naturally..."

Her co-worker nodded. "And Zabini's home... well, from what I've heard, it's impressive. Not overwhelming like the Malfoy mansion used to be, but, um..."

"Elegant," Aurora nodded in response. "Rather like its owner. It's what you'd expect of Blaise Zabini, after all."

"Oooh, yes," giggled Zinadia. "I'll bet that's the best part of a Fire Party, getting to be up close and personal with him..."

"Oh, I don't get my hopes up. I know better than to try and get between Blaise and Flame. That's why they call them their Fire Parties, you know." They shared a quiet laugh together at this, while Aurora eyed Zinadia speculatively. "Listen, you know that sometimes we can bring a guest, if we're willing to vouch for them..." Zinadia was bouncing on her toes in anticipation as Aurora finished, "Are you interested?"

"Tonight? I'd love to! Uh, you'll have to help me pick out what I should wear, I mean is it casual dress or evening wear or..."

The lift doors opened and the two witches looked up. Immediately, they were transfixed where they stood – while the smiles remained on their faces, it was only because they were frozen there.

With an expression as dark as a thundercloud, Hermione entered the lift. Her nods to Aurora and Zinadia were cordial enough, but it was patently obvious that The Witch Who Won was seething.

Aurora's self-preservation instincts kicked into overdrive. Thunderstorms, after all, were notorious for striking more than the

intended target. "Oh look, this is our floor," she said quickly. She grabbed Zinadia's wrist and stepped forward.

"Um, no it isn't..."

"Yes it is, Zee," hissed Aurora, and pulled her co-worker out of the lift just as the doors slid closed. Hermione barely noticed their departure.

Whether through luck, or through some silent message transmitted ahead of her, Hermione met no one else between the lift and her office. She stormed into her rooms, slammed her notebook down hard on her desk, fell into her chair, and put her head in her hands. The memos and letters on the desktop that would normally jostle for her attention sat prudently quiet.

Sheryl waited a moment for Hermione to regain her composure before making so bold as to peep through the doorway. "Anything I can do?"

It was one of the things Hermione liked about Sheryl. Anyone else might have started with exploratory questions: What's wrong? How are you feeling? Are you et cetera? No, Sheryl went straight for the fix.

"In the years we've worked together," Hermione finally said, not lifting her head from her hands, "have I ever asked you to do something intrinsically demeaning to your job title or position, like fetching me coffee?"

"Black, no sugar?"

"And as strong as possible. Thank you, Sheryl."

By the time Sheryl returned with a steaming mug, Hermione had recovered to some extent. The letters on her desk had been read but not answered; three references had been pulled from her bookshelves and were lying open on her desk. "I've just come back from *Magical Creatures*," she explained, accepting the coffee. "I spent the entire morning there, trying to get them to help me find a way to persuade our witnesses to cooperate. You'd think someone there would be knowledgeable in elven psychology, wouldn't you?"

"Well, yeah, I'd think so. Especially now, when they're having to deal with more freed elves than ever..."

"HAH!" The acid scorn in Hermione's voice could etch platinum. "They're still mired in the same troglodyte mentality that's worked so well over the centuries. 'Browbeat and marginalize.' First they refused to see that I might have a problem – just order the elves to testify! And then one imbecile suggested that the elves weren't competent to testify, because they could be ordered to say anything – not even realizing how contradictory that was!" Another tome joined the three on the desk.

"In the end, I had to go to Amos Diggory to get anything worthwhile," she concluded. "He said their best expert on house-elves was doing field work this week, and hard to reach... but he'd contact her and have her Floo me as soon as possible." Hermione looked disgusted.

"I'm impressed," said Sheryl dryly. "You managed to get through that entire tirade without once using the word 'stonewall'."

Hermione breathed through her nose until she was somewhat calmer. "It's not the first time I've faced tactics like this," she noted. "Kingsley and I have had to deal with plenty of stalling for each reform we've enacted."

"Now that's a point! I mean, the Minister did say you were to have every Department's full cooperation. If you're not getting it... well, couldn't he do something?"

"As it happens, I'm meeting with him this afternoon... he wants to hear the final case against Swivingham before it goes to trial Monday." As she said this, she was reminded of something; she moved aside two of the books and began to rummage through the papers on her desk. "But I don't want to bring up Diggory's stalling tactics if I can avoid it. Kingsley's so frail these days... he shouldn't have to deal with this sort of mess."

"And besides, you've always been his 'go-to girl' – you've handled messes like this before now, am I right?"

"Yes, that's true too... oh dear, the notes for the case. Where are they – oh!" Hermione lightly smacked her forehead. "I remember now, they're scattered all over my coffee table. And I really need to

research house-elf motivation... Sheryl, where's Canby? He can go to my home and collect the notes for my meeting."

"Canby, I believe, is currently making sure that the personal needs of our six witnesses – particularly Brillig – are being adequately addressed," said Sheryl in her driest voice yet.

"If he ends up compromising our star witness – in any meaning of that word – I'll ship him to the Ministry field office in the Falklands, I swear," Hermione mock-growled. She and Sheryl both knew that Canby would do nothing of the sort: as Hermione had when she'd taken the elves to Shell Cottage, he would avoid any direct mention of the Swivingham case. "All right, fine, he can take Brillig with him, but he has to get my notes back here before my meeting with the Minister!"

Sheryl nodded and turned to go. "Oh, and Sheryl?" added Hermione, lifting a sheet from the stack of daily letters, "I've a note here from Ron, asking me to lunch with him today. Will you please let him know that I'm not available? And that it's not just an excuse, I'm really not available?"

Another nod, this one with sympathy, and Sheryl left Hermione to her research. Though it took a couple of minutes for Hermione to buckle down and work. She was well aware, painfully aware, of why Ron wanted to have lunch with her. And what – or rather, who – he wanted to discuss.

Even if she weren't swamped with work, she would find an excuse to avoid talking about Harry – she'd given her word. She wished it made as good an excuse to avoid thinking about him. She'd managed to avoid it for two days... trust Ron and his lunch invitation to steer her thoughts back in that unwelcome direction.

Back from the dead – literally, according to Dumbledore, she thought. But ever since, he's been in hiding. From the wizarding world. From me. After I stood by him! The... the ungrateful berk! I could have helped him!

Except I wouldn't have helped him destroy himself. And that's just what the Hallows are doing.

Well, fine! If he wants to play the martyr, that's fine.

Except you can't play the martyr if no one's watching. If it's a lonely sacrifice... he is a martyr.

Listlessly, Hermione turned a page of the book in front of her and tried to focus on the text. She'd felt the loss of Harry for fifteen years, a profound ache and emptiness left by Harry's death. To learn that Harry hadn't died, but had hidden himself – from her! – transmuted the cold emptiness into cold anger. Hermione could forgive many things, but being made to look the fool...

Well, Harry had made his choice – stupid, pig-headed and hurtful though it was, it had been his choice – and she could do nothing now but accept it. After all, she couldn't locate him again: he was too canny to remain in that hotel room, he was almost certainly no longer there. She had no way to find Harry now. Even if she wanted to.

Even if she still – despite the anger, despite everything – missed him terribly.

XI: Fresh Perspectives

Roswitha, the proprietress of the Three Broomsticks, met Neville as he came in. "Thanks for coming," she said in a low voice. "He's actually been fine so far, but I just didn't want things to get, you know, out of hand."

"Understandable," Neville agreed. Roswitha had taken over the Three Broomsticks following her cousin Rosmerta's retirement; though she was capable enough, she was years younger than Rosmerta, and hadn't her experience in handling potential crises. "Where is he? What's he had?"

"He asked for a private room in the back. So far, three firewhiskeys and a plate of sandwiches. He hasn't touched the sandwiches."

Neville thought quickly. "Bring us a couple of butterbeers, please, and put it all on my tab." He made his way to the back room and entered with an air of confidence. Ignoring the sour look from the room's sole occupant, he took a seat at the table opposite him, picked a sandwich off the serving plate, and began to eat.

Ron glowered at Neville. "I'm not drunk."

"I didn't say you were. Hello, by the way."

"No, but you're here because I'm drunk, aren't you." Ron considered his words for a moment. "Or on the way."

"Maybe a little." Neville knew it would, in fact, take more than three shots of firewhiskey to get Ron really drunk. Their only visible effect so far had been to make his speech more emphatic, if anything. "Of course, if you insist on getting pissed, I can't very well stop you – I have one more class to teach this afternoon. But at least have something to eat first." He offered Ron the plate of sandwiches.

Ron took a sandwich and bit into it, just as Roswitha hustled into the room with two butterbeers. She left them on the table, deftly scooped up the used shot glasses, and made a graceful exit before Ron could swallow enough to ask for stronger drink.

"Hmph. It's a bleedin' conspiracy," Ron muttered. Nonetheless, he accepted the butterbeer. They ate and drank in silence for a few minutes.

"I'd planned on meeting Hermione here for lunch," Ron finally said. "She sent word this morning, she was too busy. Something about a big case on Monday."

"Sorry to hear it," said Neville. "When did you ask her to lunch?"

Ron rolled his eyes. "Okay, it was this morning. I get it. She couldn't change her schedule that quick, I should've planned ahead, I get it."

"Her work for the Wizengamot is pretty important," Neville noted mildly. "It'd be hard for her to drop it on the spur of the moment, even for family."

"Yeah. Family." Ron took a deep swig of butterbeer. "Or even for me."

Not knowing what to say to this, Neville said nothing. He was startled when Ron straightened in his seat and declared, "She dropped everything quick enough earlier this week, though, didn't she?"

"Slightly different circumstances," Neville extemporized. He knew exactly what Ron was talking about – it had been on his mind for the last two days, too.

"Not from where I sit." Ron thumped the bottle onto the table and met Neville's gaze challengingly. "So what did you think about that dog-and-pony show?"

Neville opened his mouth to reply, but Ron surged onward. "He can't be alive, Nev! It's... it's crazy! You were there when You-Know-Who marched on Hogwarts – hell, you were closest! Was that or was that not Harry's body?"

"It looked like it... but then, I was kind of preoccupied at the time." Neville sipped as he regarded Ron thoughtfully. "I do remember how broken up Hagrid looked, when he carried Harry's body out of the forest. And, well, Hagrid's no actor."

"Exactly! Exactly! And... and look at Kreacher! I mean, I like Teddy Lupin well enough, but there's no way Kreacher would consider Teddy his master if Harry were still alive! And Merlin's beard, the goblins track inheritances better than anyone – they wouldn't have passed Grimmauld Place to Teddy if Harry were still alive!"

"Nor, for that matter, would you and Hermione have received your bequests," said Neville.

Ron deflated slightly at that. "I didn't want his damned money," he said after a moment. "It was... just one more Harry-hand-out..."

"I really don't think that's how Harry meant it, Ron," protested Neville firmly. Which Ron already knew, and they both knew it – but Neville also knew there were moments when Ron believed the truth of what he'd just said, even if he wouldn't normally admit it.

After the Final Battle, Ron had chosen not to return to Hogwarts with Hermione and finish his schooling. Instead, he'd joined with George to reopen Weasley's Wizarding Wheezes. He made good money... but if he'd thought George would accept him as a partner, as a replacement for Fred, he seriously miscalculated. Ron worked hard, he contributed good ideas for new gags, and he helped the business to flourish – but his brother's employee he would always remain.

Once Hermione had received her NEWTs (setting a modern record), she'd accepted Minister Shacklebolt's personal offer, to help with codifying wizarding laws with an eye to making them fairer. Between that, and Neville's own year with the Aurors in an advisory role, Ron had seen a window of opportunity: he applied for Auror training, convinced that his exploits fighting Voldemort and Death Eaters would make up for his lack of NEWTs. He quickly learned otherwise. The Aurors would have accepted Harry, without question, and Ron might well have got into Auror training on Harry's coattails... but certainly not on his own merits.

It would be all too easy for Ron, in his darkest and bitterest moments, to credit Harry Potter for anything he had in his life – including his failures. Small wonder, then, if Ron looked askance at the possibility that Harry might not be dead.

"Look, Nev," said Ron, shaking his head as though to clear it. "Look... if Harry miraculously came back to life today, I'd be happy."

You know I would. I mean, you and I've been good friends over the years, but Harry was my best friend all through school. I'd be glad to hear he was alive – but he's not." He picked up the bottle again, but didn't drink from it... instead, he stared at it moodily. "He can't be. So why was Hermione so all-fired sure he is?"

"Well..." Neville scratched his chin. "At a guess, because Ted Lupin said under Veritaserum that he is."

Ron shrugged. "Only proves that Teddy honestly thinks Harry's alive."

"Why would he think that, though? It can't be some idle fancy on Ted's part. The amount of detail in what he told us..." Neville scowled. "I think we have to assume an imposter, Ron. Someone representing himself as Harry to Ted. The question is why."

"An imposter? Huh. I suppose, yeah..." Ron finished his butterbeer quickly and raised his voice. "Roswitha, darlin'! It's gettin' pretty dry in here!"

The door opened, and both Ron and Neville turned to greet the Broomsticks' landlady. But Roswitha had someone else beside her as she entered the room. "Hello, Neville," said Ginny pleasantly. "Cheers, Ron. A bit early in the day for ruining your liver, isn't it?"

Ron goggled at his sister for a second, before giving Roswitha a reproachful look. "Anyone else I should expect? Madame Pomfrey? The Temperance League, maybe?"

Roswitha blushed, but stood her ground. "See, here's how it is, Mr. Weasley: I'll keep serving as long as you can keep ordering them, but only if there's someone to see you home after. Or I can stop right now. Your choice."

"I think, between the two of us," Ginny smoothly interposed, "Neville and I can take care of this. Why don't you bring Ron one for the road, as it were? And a Cliodna's Choice for me. Neville? No?" She joined Ron and Neville at the table as Roswitha left to fill their orders, flipping her waist-length hair over the back of the chair as she sat down.

"You're lucky, actually," she continued cheerfully. "Play-off training doesn't begin until next week. So when I got Roswitha's owl, I was free to pop over." She smiled at Neville. "I haven't seen you in a while, Neville. How're you and Susan doing?"

"As well as always," replied Neville. Whenever their paths crossed, Ginny never failed to ask after Susan. His relations with Ginny were currently friendly enough – on the surface, certainly – but neither of them could forget their history.

"Glad to hear it," said Ginny. "So... what were you talking about so intensely when I showed up?"

Neville couldn't help giving Ron a warning look. Ron responded with an almost-but-not-quite roll of the eyes, to say that he didn't need the warning. "We were playing 'what-if' games," Ron said. "You know, what our lives would've been like if Harry hadn't died."

Ginny blinked, obviously not expecting that answer. "Well, I probably wouldn't be Chaser for the Harpies," she said candidly. She didn't need to elaborate; her pursuit of Harry before he'd died was well known to the other two. "And Neville probably wouldn't be a professor," she added.

"Oh, I imagine I would," Neville objected. "I enjoy working with students, after all."

She shook her head pityingly. "Harry would be teaching Defense Against the Dark Arts, not you. I mean, think about it. If he'd lived, he'd be... well, the Boy Who Lived. Not to detract from what you did," she added reassuringly, "but compared to Harry? He'd have put you in the shade – even if you weren't letting him. Which you would've – you let The Witch Who Won do it to you, after all."

"Hardly a question of 'letting'. We both played our parts – but in the Final Battle, people will remember that I killed Voldemort's snake and she killed Voldemort. She earned her title, I'd say."

"You organized the resistance at Hogwarts – even after Luna and I left," Ginny insisted. "You fought as well as anybody in the Battle. You could have parleyed that into some major clout, if you'd wanted. You could have been a real mover and player in today's world, and you know I'm right."

Neville sighed. They'd been over this ground many times during their brief relationship, before it fell apart, and he felt not the slightest desire to go over it again now.

Their drinks arrived, putting a hold on the discussion. As soon as Roswitha left the room, however, Ginny picked up the thread. "And what about you, Ron?" she asked, turning to her brother. "D'you reckon you'd be an Auror by now, if Harry'd lived? You and Hermione could've made a great team: you'd catch the dark wizards, and she'd try them."

"I think," Neville interrupted sharply, "we've just about played out this game. Let's drop it, shall we?" He was irritated by Ginny's jibe at Ron – with its catty reference to Ron's and Hermione's estrangement – and it showed in his voice. This was his classroom voice now, the one that expected immediate compliance.

Rather to his private surprise, he got it. "Sorry," murmured Ginny shamefacedly, looking down at the drink in her hands. "I was being mean, wasn't I? I'm sorry, Ron... Neville..."

Neville's expression showed he agreed. All he said, however, as he rose from the table, was, "No worries. Well, I need to get back to Hogwarts. Ginny, you sure you can see him home? He's really not..."

"Not that pissed yet," Ron confirmed. "And I am sitting right here. No, Gin and I will finish our drinks, catch up on our lives, and then she'll take me back to my rooms in Diagon Alley. I'll be right as rain in the morning." He caught Neville's eye and nodded in appreciation. "Thanks, Nev."

Nodding back, Neville took his leave of the Weasley siblings. He couldn't help but feel a little sorry for Ron: his life hadn't turned out at all the way he'd hoped, at the end of the War. Neither had Neville's, come to that, but in Neville's case it had turned out better than his hopes. In particular, while he and Ginny had grown close as comrades-in-arms during the War, and after the War sought comfort with one another for their losses, he'd realized in time that it would be a huge mistake for them to marry.

In that respect, he'd avoided Ron's mistake.

Well, that went a little better than I expected, thought Hermione as she Apparated back to the Ministry. At least we have options now.

Her afternoon meeting with Shacklebolt had included Robards; between the three of them, they'd finalized her strategies for the Swivingham trial on Monday. Several strategies, in fact, depending on whether the exploited house-elves would testify or not. There was still other evidence that could be presented – financial records, surveillance reports – and humans in Jack Swivingham's organization that might cooperate in exchange for a reduced sentence.

And as they left Shacklebolt's home, the Minister had quietly pressed a sealed envelope into her hand, murmuring "From Croaker" as he did so. Hermione suspected it contained more information about the blocked door in the Department of Mysteries – perhaps even the newly appeared runes that Croaker had mentioned. Not that Hermione thought she could decipher them more easily than the Unspeakables' own rune-readers, but she'd already agreed to help however she could.

It would all make for a busy weekend, but Hermione was used to being at the Ministry on weekends.

As she approached her office, she heard a familiar voice waft through the open door. "... don't worry, it's a common mistake. I don't know why anyone would think Rolf would even be interested in me that way – after all, he is older than me. And I'm still taking care of Daddy, you know..."

"Hello, Luna," Hermione called out, before entering the office. Luna Lovegood stood chatting with a bemused Sheryl. Her blonde hair had been bleached almost white by the sun, which had unfortunately left her skin slightly burnt. As Hermione approached, Luna turned and reached out for Hermione's hands, smiling broadly.

"I heard this summer's trip was to Morocco," Hermione said. "Welcome back! What did you find?" Hermione had long since learned that, every once in a while, one of Luna's strange imaginary creatures wasn't all that imaginary. Her annual summer trips with Rolf Scamander had brought several new species to light, such as the ypotril two years ago.

"Nothing definite. We visited the Atlas Mountains, looking for tragopans. We found some spots that might have been nests, but no other signs." Luna shrugged and smiled. "If we go back next year, we'll keep looking."

Once upon a time, Luna would have taken those indefinite nests as positive proof. Time has tempered her, too, Hermione reflected. Aloud she said, "Well, come inside then. What brings you here? I'm always happy for a visit, but I have to keep it brief..."

"The Jack Swivingham prosecution," nodded Luna. "Yes, that's why I'm here."

Hermione paused. "Do you mean... are you the Magical Creatures' expert on house-elves?"

"Well, as much as anyone can be. I'm not officially an employee of the Department, but I do hire out to them on special occasions." They entered Hermione's rooms and took seats as Luna continued, "I gather Mr. Diggory sent an owl to Morocco to find out if I was available. Luckily, I'd arrived home days earlier than I expected – in fact, I came to the Ministry today to check on the status of plimpie overfishing. Mr. Diggory promised he'd do something about the plimpies, which are close to extinction, you know..."

"Yes, no doubt, no doubt. Now about the elves, Luna..." Quickly Hermione summarized the current situation with the six elves she hoped would give testimony. "They won't even say why they won't testify," she concluded. "But given the timing of the 'depositions', I'm assuming some sort of pressure was put on them."

"It would be easy enough to do," commented Luna. "Probably the most important motivation in house-elf psychology is the desire to serve humans. Certainly it's one of the strongest. I'd even say it was genetic, just as some breeds of dog are naturally-born retrievers." Luna paused, curling her hair around her finger in thought. "Their desire is to serve, mind you, not necessarily to please. I've known cases where an elf would risk his master's displeasure because the elf was sure it was serving faithfully."

"You're thinking of Dobby, I assume?"

"Dobby's the prime example, yes – but then, Dobby was extraordinary in so many ways." She tapped her teeth with her fingernail, considering. "Perhaps I could speak with one or two of them? Sometimes the questions they won't answer are more instructive than the ones they will."

"Of course. Sheryl, is Canby at hand?" Even before Sheryl could reply, Canby had appeared by Hermione's side with a puff of displaced air. "Oh, Canby! Good. Miss Lovegood would like to talk to one or two of our guests... probably Whimsy and Chalice..."

"Will be no need, Miss Hermione!" chirped Canby. "All our guests have told Canby they will testify at trial!"

There was utter silence, which Luna seemed compelled to fill. "Well, that's wonderful! Your name is Canby? You must have been very persuasive to have convinced all of them!"

"Oh, no, miss. They is deciding on their own! Brillig is telling them..."

"Telling them?" Luna prompted. Hermione had still said nothing.

"T-Telling them the great Dobby would have wanted this! It is... it is as Miss Hermione said at Dobbywatch. Dobby fought to save Harry Potter, fought for right, and now we all must fight for right. And so they will."

"This... this is very sudden, Canby," Hermione managed to say. She broke into a warm smile, wrapped her arm around Canby and gave him a quick squeeze. "But very, very welcome."

Canby blushed as Hermione released him. "Thank you, Miss Hermione. But Canby did nothing. They are wanting to help Miss Hermione, because she has done so much."

"I don't know about that... but in any event, this is splendid news." Hermione paused and cast her mind over the commitments she'd already made for the weekend. "I like to review the prosecution witnesses' testimony one final time before the trial begins, just so there are no surprises. We'll have to do that Monday morning very early... shall we say, six? Canby, will you be here then to help me?"

With nods so enthusiastic that his head looked in danger of falling off, Canby assured Hermione that he would do all in his power to help. Upon Hermione's nod of dismissal, he teleported out of the room. Hermione glanced at Luna happily. "Well, I'm sorry you came in here for nothing, but I do thank you! Perhaps after this trial's done, we can get together and just talk..."

"Of course," said Luna absently – or rather, more absently than usual. Puzzlement creased her brows.

"What?" asked Hermione, noticing.

Luna shook herself. "Oh, probably nothing. But it's... I can't help but feel Canby's not being strictly forthright about the elves' sudden change of heart. Remember, what they don't say is more important than what they do... and Canby wasn't any too specific about their reason for switching."

When Hermione arrived home, the first thing she noticed was a bit of parchment on the low table where all her case notes had been spread. It wasn't like Canby to leave an item behind... Upon closer inspection, it was a stiff card made of pasteboard, not parchment, with the words *For Emergencies* neatly handwritten on it.

The handwriting seemed familiar, somehow, but for the moment, Hermione couldn't identify it. She went to the kitchen, expecting to find Bottlebrush waiting by his dish as always. But Bottlebrush wasn't there.

"Bottlebrush?" called Hermione, walking rapidly back to the living room. Bottlebrush was settled on the sofa – she'd been so wrapped up in her usual evening routine, she'd missed seeing him – looking steadily at the bit of pasteboard. Now thoroughly mystified, Hermione picked up the card to get a better look at it.

Even as she recognized the handwriting as the same unnaturally perfect script in the flyleaf of Rose's book, the letters began to change shape. They quickly reformed into a telephone number, followed by a glyph: a bisected circle within a triangle.

Only a handful of living people, including Hermione, knew that glyph to be the symbol of the Deathly Hallows. And of those, only one would be using it as a signature – on a piece of Muggle pasteboard.

She dropped the card back onto the table and watched the pen-strokes flow and reform into the words For Emergencies. Evidently it took the touch of her fingers to cause the phone number to appear. Hermione was willing to bet that the Transfiguration was keyed to her fingers alone. Which would require a sample of my tissue... blood would work best. But where could he have... ah, of course. Hair from my comb, saliva from my toothbrush, any number of sources once he had access to my home.

And how did he gain access to my home? she wondered. Like all high-level Ministry officials, Hermione had several levels of magical protection on Enthalpy House; the memory of Scrimgeour's assassination, though it was sixteen years earlier, had never been forgotten. After a moment, she shrugged it off as another example of the Hallows' power.

So Harry's decided to share his phone number with me. Great. Maybe after another fifteen years, we'll start trading Christmas cards.

She walked back into the kitchen, her emotions turbulent. Harry had made it very clear he'd never rejoin the wizarding world. That was certainly the impression he'd given! Why, then, would he seem to open the door to the possibility, by giving her a means of contacting him? He had to know that, sooner or later, there would come a crisis that needed Harry Potter's aid.

And in such a crisis, he'd left the decision to come back in her hands.

I don't want it to be my decision! If Harry's going to come back, let him come back of his own free will! Not under duress, or "for emergencies", but because he wants to come back.

I want him to want to come back.

The thought brought her up short in the midst of feeding Bottlebrush. He had regretted staying away, once the Cloak was no longer deadening his feelings. She could see the remorse on his face. But he also believed he was doing the right thing, the only possible thing under the circumstances – and for the life of her, she couldn't see any other way to break the Hallows' power.

She pondered the question for a moment longer. The Hallows themselves would have to be well-nigh indestructible, to have survived intact all these centuries; the only power capable of destroying them was the power that had created them, the power of Death. There was no way around it: to eliminate the Hallows, Harry had to die... without transferring the mastery to anyone else.

Either way, Harry wouldn't be returning.

Dejected by her analysis, Hermione quickly ate a light snack and returned to her sofa. She picked up the card again, and watched in a detached way as the lettering reshaped itself into the phone number. It's just as well he keyed the Transfiguration to me, she thought randomly. Most people wouldn't understand the sign of the Deathly Hallows... they'd think it was...

For one second, she froze in place, staring at the card. Then she dashed to her briefcase and scrabbled through it, eventually finding the envelope from Croaker. Ripping open the envelope, she snatched out its contents: a folded packet of parchment, sealed with black wax.

She was familiar with the seals used by the Department of Mysteries... they were made of the same wax as in their candles. "I am Hermione Granger," she told the seal, and with a spurt of blue fire it cracked open at once. Impatiently she shook off the wax fragments, unfolded the parchment, and scanned it for the item she was absolutely certain must be there.

Ten minutes later, she was standing in a call-box in Soho, dialing frantically. "The party you are calling – Howard Seaker – is not available. At the tone, please record your message," came the unemotional voice-mail recording.

"Howard Seaker? Oh, please. Fine, you know who this is, you were at my house today. Come back there the moment you hear this message – because I may have a way for you to safely lose those three crosses you've been carrying."

XII: Answers Beget Riddles

Hermione made ready for bed in a state of extreme dudgeon. Harry had not come to Enthalpy House in response to her message – he hadn't even sent a reply. So much for 'Emergencies', she thought disgruntledly as she doused the lights and climbed into bed.

Her head had barely touched the pillow before a flash of silver darted into her bedroom. It stopped in front of her face and took the form of a tiny silver stag. "I'll be right there," Harry's voice said in her head, and the Patronus messenger dissolved into mist.

Even as she reached for her wand to brighten the room, there was a tiny puff of air and Harry's figure was suddenly framed in the window. "Hermione? Oh, damn, I'm sorry, you were asleep. I'm sorry, but your message did say..."

"It did... I mean, I did," she said, bringing up the lights. "It's all right – thanks for coming."

"Um... um, well... it sounded important. I'm, uh, I'm sorry I didn't get your message... I was, er, out in the field, and couldn't take my phone with me."

"Playing guardian angel again?" Hermione began, before it came to her that Harry wasn't sounding very articulate... and couldn't seem to take his eyes off her. With a start, she remembered what she wore to bed this time of year – or more accurately, how little she wore to bed. Thin camisole and knickers, to be precise.

She felt her face grow hot with embarrassment, and tried to mask it with her usual brisk manner. "Oh for goodness sake, Harry, it's nothing you haven't seen before. Honestly, we spent weeks together in a tent, and you hardly gave me a second glance then."

"Sorry," repeated Harry, averting his gaze. But his lopsided smile suggested that he may have given Hermione more glances than she'd noticed at the time. "I'll, er, just wait in the other room, shall I?" He made a quick exit, eyes averted all the while.

Five minutes later, wearing hastily-thrown-on sweats, Hermione came out of the bedroom to find Harry sitting on the couch,

Bottlebrush purring in deep contentment on his lap. "Well, that's a surprise," she commented. "Bottlebrush doesn't usually make friends so quickly."

"Bottlebrush, is it? Hello there, Bottlebrush..." He gently scratched under the kneazle's chin; the purring grew louder. "I suppose you got him after Crookshanks died... what, two years ago?"

Hermione stared at Harry.

"There in your bedroom," Harry confirmed, nodding at the door. "You found him on your bed... died in his sleep, of old age. Well, he was old for a cat, or even a kneazle." He smiled gently at Hermione's astonishment, and held up his hand to display the Resurrection Stone ring. "I can feel passages, Hermione, like the old man the other night. I can sense... currents... where Death's been. The details aren't always clear, but the threnodies help sometimes."

"Th-thren...?"

"Threnodies." He held a finger and thumb a couple of inches apart. "Little things, kind of like butterflies, but I think they live on the same Death currents I can sense. And they sing..." Harry sighed as Hermione gave him a look she usually reserved for Luna Lovegood. "Right, you remember the thestrals? Most people can't see thestrals, because they live in more than one world... well, believe me, thestrals are only the beginning."

She nodded slowly. "I do believe you. I do indeed." Hermione sat on the other end of the sofa. She looked searchingly at Harry's face, but didn't say anything for a moment. When she spoke, it was with deep concern. "And what about you, Harry?"

He understood. "I'm still in this world..." he said, but he looked away from her as he said it.

"And you're slipping away a little more every day... Never mind," she said quickly with a shake of her head. She didn't want an argument to start. "I'm just glad you came. I may have discovered a way to destroy the Hallows without your needing to die."

He quickly turned his head to face her again. "The Elder Wand is the main problem... it's the Deathstick, after all. And I think it even

powers the other two. But we can't destroy it, Hermione – it's too powerful for that. And I don't dare just lose it, like throw it into the North Sea or something. It's like that ring in the Tolkien books, it would find a way to be found again. And in the meantime, its magic is still..."

"I wasn't thinking that," Hermione interrupted, pulling out the document from Croaker. "I was thinking more like, 'Return To Sender'."

She definitely had his full attention now. "The Department of Mysteries has noticed that it can't get into one of its many rooms," she began, unfolding the parchment and spreading it on the low table. "There's some sort of barrier across the doorway. I volunteered to help them figure out the cause, and they gave me these runes that appeared inside the room. Now, they interpreted these symbols to refer either to me, the destroyer of Voldemort, or to Voldemort, the destroyer of Grindelwald." She pointed to one rune: a bisected circle within a triangle. "But what they don't realize is that this isn't the rune for Grindelwald, it's the rune..."

"For the Hallows," Harry finished. "The same mistake Krum made when he met Lovegood."

"So the runes really refer to the destruction of the Hallows," concluded Hermione. "And given what I know of the Department, the runes are almost certainly on the Arch – the one in the Death Chamber." She didn't need to say more: the details of the room where Sirius Black died were surely etched in Harry's memory.

Harry nodded thoughtfully. "So I just hand the Hallows over to you, and you take them to the Death Chamber and bung them through the Arch, and that's it?"

"Er, no, not me," said Hermione slowly. "I can't get in – that barrier, remember?"

She watched as the hands stroking Bottlebrush froze in place. Horror began to spread across his face. "Hermione," he whispered pleadingly, "Hermione, I... I can't..."

"Only you can. You're the Elder Wand's master. Only you can get through the barrier – I'd bet it's there to keep out everyone but you.

"It's simply too much of a coincidence that the Death Chamber should seal itself off when the Hallows are united." Hermione tried very hard to sound reasonable.

"It's not just that. It's... I'm supposed to be dead. I can't go where magical people can see me... and I really can't go waltzing into the Ministry of Magic! They'd stop me... I wouldn't get anywhere near the Arch..."

"I thought your Invisibility Cloak...?"

"I, uh..." For a moment, diffidence overcame the anguish on his face. "I haven't worn it for the last few days, you know."

"This one last time, I don't think it will matter," she said in matter-of-fact tones. Inwardly, Hermione felt absurdly pleased that he'd listened to her. "Once the Hallows are gone, after all, it won't matter if everyone knows you're alive." She gave an exasperated sigh as Harry continued to hesitate. "We'll come up with some cover story, if you like. But you have to do this."

Slowly, reluctantly, he nodded.

Hermione wasn't reassured by his sudden silence. "Well, then," she said briskly, "let's get some sleep, and we can be at the Ministry tomorrow morning. Harry, you can take the sofa here..."

"Actually, I'm not particularly sleepy," he said apologetically. "I don't seem to sleep much these days... anyway, there are a couple more, er, 'field errands' I was hoping to do tonight..."

"No," she interrupted firmly. "You have to stay here." In a flash, she'd connected his reluctance and his sudden silence with his past behavior, and she saw what he must be planning.

"What..."

"I mean it," she interrupted him again. "I know what you're thinking: you're thinking you don't need to expose yourself to the Ministry when all you need to do is vanish again! It won't work, Harry Potter. You're staying right here where I can keep an eye on you!"

"Hermione..."

She stood to face him as he sat. "Do I have to chain you to that sofa?" she demanded.

Bottlebrush laid back his ears, hissed, and jumped off Harry's lap. Harry regarded her silently, a touch of grimness tightening his mouth. Hermione had a moment to realize that, if she'd used that tone of voice with almost anyone at the Ministry, they'd be scuttling to do as she bade; if she'd spoken to Ron that way, it would have guaranteed a furious shouting match.

But not this man.

He'd fought against bullying and abuse his entire life. Even when they were at Hogwarts, he seldom gave in to her bossiness. Harry wouldn't argue – but he couldn't be browbeaten.

When he spoke again, there was a faint but unmistakable growl in the edge of his voice. "They'd better be really good chains."

"Oh, Merlin, I didn't... I didn't mean..." Hermione's mind was a whirlwind of thoughts and emotions. Without input from her brain, her mouth began to work on its own: "I'm sorry, Harry, I didn't really mean I'd chain you, but you were dead and gone from my life and now you're back and I can't give you up again. I'm just afraid you'll leave... again..."

By this time she'd sat heavily on the sofa next to him. She had to press her lips together to keep from babbling further. She'd ruined it, ruined everything, before it had even had a chance to heal... she'd let her anger, her anxiety, her pain control her, and they were driving him away as surely as his own noble intentions. She kept her gaze lowered, unable to meet his eyes, which she knew would be cold and angry.

So Hermione didn't expect to see his hand enter her field of view, coming to rest atop her own hand. "I'm not leaving," he said very softly.

She still didn't raise her eyes. "You did," she whispered.

"Yeah." Neither of them moved or spoke for a long minute.

"It's too late tonight," Harry said at length, "but we really need to talk." He paused. "I will be at the Ministry tomorrow," he promised. "What time?"

Hermione did look at him then. He gazed back at her solemnly, with a slight apprehension in his green eyes. He means it, she told herself, and felt the knot of tension in her chest relax. He said he'll be there, and he'll be there. The parallel to their long-ago interview with Rita Skeeter wasn't lost on her.

"Nine thirty," she replied. "You should wear the Cloak, at least at first. Meet me in the Ministry atrium." The relaxation in her chest made her feel almost giddy; she couldn't resist adding, "I'll wait for you by the big statue on the black pedestal. You can't miss it."

Saturday morning found Hermione standing in the Ministry atrium, next to the display case at the Potter Memorial. For the first time she could remember, it didn't give her heart a pang to view the large bronze statue. In fact, she actually found the items in the glass display case... well, amusing. I'm glad I transfigured Harry's "wand" back, though. That might have been awkward to explain.

She stiffened, but managed not to cry out in surprise, when she felt a small object press against her ear. Soft and button-shaped... it was one end of an Extendable Ear. Through the bud she heard Harry's voice in her ear: "I never looked that good in my life." She didn't turn her head, but gave a quick smile to acknowledge she'd heard him. A glance out of the corner of her eye showed exactly what she expected to see: nothing.

Well, a memorial statue has nothing to do with life, does it? Hermione would have liked to say it aloud, but for the moment, secrecy was still in force.

She turned away from the Memorial and towards the lifts, and felt the button recede from her ear. Careful to restrain her pace – neither faster nor slower than normal – she strode to the lifts, where a witch and a wizard stood waiting. She gave them both a smile and a greeting. "Good morning, Hutchings, Fenchurch."

"Morning, ma'am," said Fenchurch. They fell into the habitual silence that descends upon people gathered watching the lifts' numbers change.

"It... it's a lovely day, isn't it?" suggested Hutchings.

"It certainly is," agreed Hermione, slightly surprised. She'd had few dealings with Hutchings, who worked in the Floo Network Authority.

"Yes, we thought so, too," put in Fenchurch. "Perfect gardening weather... Grimble's already started his Pumpkin Pool." And Fenchurch was even more surprising: she barely knew Fenchurch by sight. Are they making... small talk with me? she wondered. Not that Ministry employees never made small talk, but they rarely seemed to do it with her.

Two lifts arrived; Hutchings and Fenchurch entered the one going up with affable nods at Hermione. She took the downward lift to the ninth level. None of her senses offered a clue that Harry was in the lift with her – no slight change in air pressure, no sound of breathing, nothing – but she knew he was there.

Arriving on the ninth level, she proceeded down the corridor to the black door leading to the Department of Mysteries. Opening it, she looked into the round, many-doored foyer, lit by its odd black candles – she stood in the doorway to the corridor and left the door open. "I'm Madam Granger, and I need to speak to Croaker," she announced.

Nothing happened. She waited another moment, then entered the foyer (inconspicuously touching her wand's tip to the door as she stepped through). Once the door closed, the foyer's walls immediately began to revolve, fast enough to blur their features. Finally the room slowed, stopped, and one of the doors opened to admit Croaker. He regarded Hermione, silent and impassive.

"I need to see the runes for myself. They're on the Arch in the Death Chamber, aren't they?" Hermione asked without preamble.

Only a slight crease of his eyebrows betrayed Croaker's surprise. "The runes you were given were an accurate transcription," he said after a moment.

Hermione shook her head. "The relative placement of a series of runes has as much meaning as the runes themselves." She took the parchment from her pocket and unfolded it to show the symbol of

the Hallows. Pointing to it, she said, "This one, for instance, is centered on the Arch's lintel, isn't it?"

Croaker hesitated, and Hermione pressed her advantage. "And they aren't in a row, as on this sheet, but on multiple lines, yes? So a rune on the bottom line could apply to two runes on the top line, yes?" She said nothing further, trusting her point had been made.

Evidently it had, though Croaker gave no acknowledgement of the fact. With a tiny wave of his hand, he motioned her to another of the doors. He pushed it open and entered – Hermione following immediately behind – and called out. "Eldritch. Show Granger to the Death Chamber." With a final, unreadable look at Hermione, he took his leave.

Eldritch was... grey. No other word was as apt: his hair and beard were short-cropped and grey, his eyes unnaturally pale; even his robes exuded an air of dusty huelessness. But he was personable, where Croaker was not. "This way, Madam Granger."

Shortly they'd arrived at the door to the Death Chamber. Looking through it, Hermione could see the rows of low benches, and in the center the Arch. It had indeed changed since the last time she'd seen it, when she was sixteen: now the Arch was completely covered with scores of graven runes, glowing a dull red, like coals against the dark stone. But the black veil that fluttered as though in a breeze, even in the still air – that hadn't changed.

"So... this barrier..." Hermione said to Eldritch. "Is it merely a barrier, or is it more, er...?"

"Active?" Eldritch shook his head and stretched out a hand. "Not as far as we can tell. It won't hex you to touch it. You simply won't be able to get through." He drew back his hand and added, "Try it."

Tentatively, Hermione reached out with her fingertips. At the very center of the door frame, they stopped abruptly. It didn't feel like anything – it wasn't as though there were an invisible glass wall, or stone wall, or whatever – but her fingers would go no further. "I didn't realize the Arch was so far from the door," she said. "Do you have a set of omnioculars I could borrow?"

"Not omnioculars," said Eldritch reprovingly. Hermione recalled that omnioculars could record a scene; obviously, the Unspeakables would never permit that. "But we have a set of opera glasses," he added. "It's what we used to transcribe the runes for you. I'll go fetch them, back in a moment."

Hermione stepped away from the door as Eldritch walked away. That would give Harry plenty of working room. She tried not to look as though she were watching carefully... she was curious as to exactly how he'd breach the barrier.

Eldritch returned with the glasses in his hand. "Here we go. You'll probably want a chair to sit in as you read them. My own concern was whether there were more runes on the side of the Arch we can't see."

"If so, there's not much we can do about it," commented Hermione, taking the glasses. She hefted them experimentally, buying a minute more time...

"Yeow!" cried Eldritch. Hermione had felt it too: a wave of shock, like an electrical shock, passing through them. It caused them both to jump into the air and twitch for a few moments.

Eldritch was staring at the doorway. "That came from inside!" he cried. He reached into the pocket of his robe and pulled out a spell residue detector, like the one Dennis Creevey had used when investigating 'Jacob Clayman'. "Michaels! Brymston!" he shouted over his shoulder as he fiddled with the device. "I need the Number Two Analyzer here now! And bring three – no, four resonance jars! Excuse me," he added brusquely to Hermione, all but shoving her away from the doorway as he thrust the device forward.

Hermione watched as two more Unspeakables, clad in green robes, pushed a cart loaded with gear up the corridor to the Death Chamber. She imagined the looks on their faces when Harry Potter made himself visible in the Chamber, threw the Deathly Hallows through the Arch, and walked out to greet...

Suddenly, a cold weight settled into her stomach. We assumed the barrier and the Hallows were linked – that the barrier would disappear when the Hallows were destroyed. What if we were

wrong? If Harry destroys the Elder Wand, and then can't leave the Chamber...!

Wide-eyed and speechless, she watched the Unspeakables assemble their apparatus... looking past them into the Chamber, waiting for Harry to appear, Hallows in hand, preparing to throw... if only she could catch his eye and warn him in time...

She jumped again. The Extendable Ear nub had been pressed to her ear.

"It wouldn't let me in," said Harry.

"You're sure you did nothing?" asked Croaker, as he escorted Hermione back to the Mysteries foyer. By now, there were a half dozen wizards and witches clustered around the doorway to the Death Chamber, all testing to see if the burst of shock-magic would recur.

"I hadn't even started making notes on my copy of the runes," said Hermione calmly. "All I'd done was touch the barrier, and Eldritch did so before me."

Croaker didn't respond, but he continued to eye Hermione with that unblinking gaze. She gave him little mind; her thoughts were on Harry's words: Having said he couldn't get in, he'd said nothing further. She wished there'd been some way to ask him questions, but even whispers would have been heard in that small space. Discussion would have to wait until they got back to Enthalpy House.

They arrived at the round foyer to discover that another outsider had arrived. Blaise Zabini was delivering a portfolio of official-looking documents to two senior Unspeakables. "The passes are good for one week," he was explaining to them. "You'll be granted full access to Nurmengard, but you won't be permitted to remove anything. I couldn't convince them to permit photographs, but you can make all the tracings you want..."

Zabini stopped upon seeing Croaker and Hermione. "Everything else you'll need is in the packet," he concluded, with a charming smile. He accepted the Unspeakables' thanks graciously but hurriedly. He quickly turned his attention to Croaker and Hermione.

"So, Croaker old man, I see you've recruited Granger. Don't tell me she's considering a career change, from law to research? Not that you wouldn't be outstanding as an Unspeakable, Granger."

"Granger's been helping us resolve a small anomaly," said Croaker. "I'll let you both out now." Only an Unspeakable, in theory, could select the exit from amongst the identical doors of the foyer.

Hermione promptly strode to the proper door and held it open for Zabini... and, she hoped, for Harry. She'd unobtrusively tagged the exit when she'd first arrived, after all – Just In Case. (A precaution she'd learned from her first, illicit, visit to the Department of Mysteries.) The opportunity to score on Croaker and Zabini was simply too great to pass up.

She nodded farewell to Croaker, who remained standing in the foyer staring incredulously at her, and gently closed the door behind her.

"By the way, it would appear congratulations are in order," smiled Zabini. "I understand the witnesses against Jack Swivingham have agreed to cooperate fully."

"They have," said Hermione, wondering how he knew. Granted that she hadn't told anyone to keep it secret, the elves had only come to their decision the day before.

"And I must say, I'm impressed with how you convinced them," he continued smoothly. "In some ways, Granger, it's a pity you couldn't have been Sorted into Slytherin."

"Beg pardon?"

"Oh, come now, don't be so modest. Starting a rumor that Harry Potter has returned from the dead? Sheer genius!" Zabini applauded softly.

"I didn't...!" Hermione suppressed the urge to look around for Harry. It would be pointless: either he wasn't there, or he was invisible. Hermione fervently hoped that he was gone, and couldn't hear this...

"No, of course you didn't. Of course." Zabini gave her a knowing smirk. "Still, the elves believe it, and that's what counts, eh? They'd

do anything for their great hero. Genius, I say again. I wish I'd thought of it."

Hermione looked Zabini straight in the eye. "You must be mistaken, Zabini. I have not started, or spread, any tale about Harry. Alive or dead." Are you listening, Harry? she called silently. I didn't do this! I promised I'd keep your secret, and I have! Are you listening?

Zabini cocked his head and regarded her curiously. "Well," he said after a moment, "it doesn't matter, I suppose. The elves will testify against Swivingham on Monday... anything else is superfluous. You'll certainly end with another jewel in your cap."

"Jewels in my cap are fairly superfluous, too," she retorted. "Far more important is the chance to clean up the seamier side of the wizarding world – and put the head of this filthy criminal cartel in Azkaban where he belongs!"

For an instant, Zabini's eyes narrowed. The smile remained on his face, but it had lost all pretense of affability. "I quite agree," he said. "Scum like Swivingham are a disgrace to the name of wizard." Then his smile broadened, and the bonhomie returned so quickly that Hermione couldn't be sure it had vanished. "Good luck on Monday, then, Granger. We're all looking forward to your victory in court."

He gave a slight bow, one hand over his heart, and strode briskly down the corridor towards the lift. Hermione didn't follow him... she was waiting until Zabini was out of earshot.

Then she whispered, "Harry? Harry? Please, Harry, come back tonight. You were right, we need to talk... Harry?"

But whether Harry had been standing beside her all along, or had already left, the response was the same.

XIII: Unfogging the Past

Hermione tried to leave the Ministry as quickly as she could, but she promptly discovered that the Senior Counsel to the Wizengamot couldn't arrive in the Ministry, even on a Saturday, without people descending on her, bearing items that required her immediate attention. Even after escaping the press of business, she was still stopped several times on her way to the Apparation point in the atrium, by people asking if she'd heard "the latest rumor". No one, thank goodness, seemed inclined to actually believe that Harry had "come back from the dead"... but interestingly, none of them dismissed it out of hand, either.

It wasn't until late afternoon that she arrived back at Enthalpy House, only to discover it empty... seemingly so, at least. "Harry?" she called out tentatively, and then more urgently when she got no reply. In a rush she looked for some sign that he'd been there: searching among the mail (from Ron, from professional journals, from others) for another charmed bit of pasteboard, dashing from room to room to see if he'd left items there.

I was afraid of this, she told herself frantically. He heard Zabini's remark, and now he's sure that I've told everyone he's not dead. He's decided he can't trust me...

There was a tiny, almost silent pop of air, and Harry Apparated into her living room. He regarded her with a neutral face, and raised a paper sack in one hand. "Hungry?" he asked. His tone was like his expression, neither hostile nor cheerful.

Hermione couldn't tell what was going through Harry's mind, but she knew she needed to clear the air at once. "Harry, I don't know how a rumor got started about your return, much less why Blaise Zabini is giving me credit for it. But please believe me: since we met in your hotel room, I haven't told a soul about you. At all."

Harry didn't react to her words at first. "I brought sarnies," he finally said, still in that neutral tone. "D'you prefer beef or chicken?"

"Chicken. Harry, please believe..."

"I do," he said curtly, without waiting for her to finish. He sat at the coffee table, unpacked the paper sack, and offered her a wrapped

sandwich. Hermione hesitated, then accepted the sandwich and sat on the sofa, neither too close to him nor too far away. She very much wanted to continue probing him, making sure he accepted her word, but something held her back for the moment.

Harry broke the quiet. "You're nervous," he shrewdly noted – but though his voice was mild enough, his eyes were hard. "But really, I believe you: you haven't told anyone about seeing me in my hotel room." He paused, sighed and raised his gaze to meet hers directly. "But Ted said something about an interview, where you first brought up the possibility of my survival. In front of a crowd."

Ah. Hermione saw where his thoughts were headed. "Yes, but I only stated the possibility, Harry; it wasn't confirmed. More important, every person in that room can be trusted. You've trusted them all, Harry, in the past." She counted on her fingers. "Professors McGonagall and Longbottom. Bill and..."

"Professor' Longbottom? Neville?" Momentarily, Harry sounded both surprised and pleased.

"He's very popular with his students, so I'm told... Bill and Fleur. Andromeda Tonks. Ron. Ted, Victoire, and Rose..." She frowned suddenly. "I've tried to teach Rose the importance of keeping confidences, but she is only eleven. She might have blurted it where people could hear."

"Mph – but probably not people who'd report to Blaise Zabini so quickly," Harry mused, turning again serious – almost grim, thought Hermione. She'd succeeded in identifying his attitude: that of a man who felt himself wrongly done by, but trying nonetheless not to rush to judgment. "Portraits, perhaps? Could any of the school portraits have overheard you?"

"Only Professor Dumbledore's, in the Headmistress's office. And you know those portraits are pledged to serve the Headmistress." Hermione took another bite of her sandwich, thinking hard how she might demonstrate her innocence. "The easiest way to trace the rumor would simply be to ask Canby where he and the other elves heard..."

"No," put in Harry hastily. "Er, no, that won't be necessary."

"What? But why not...?" Hermione began, but she didn't need to finish. The scene flashed before her mind's eye, complete in every detail: Harry comes to Enthalpy House to deliver his "Emergency contact" card – at the same time that Canby and Brillig arrive to gather my notes for my meeting with Kingsley! "I... I don't bloody believe it! I wracked my brains looking to persuade the elves to testify, and you just show up and...!"

"I didn't tell them to do anything – I didn't even know who they were!" protested Harry, suddenly on the defensive. "And I pledged them to secrecy..."

"Are you serious? Are you freaking serious?" Hermione slammed the half-eaten sandwich onto the table and glared furiously at Harry. "Let's pretend that two nuns enter a chapel and find Jesus Christ standing there. And Jesus tells them, 'Oh, this isn't the Second Coming, I'm not supposed to be here, you'll keep my secret, won't you?' Do you honestly think those nuns could keep a secret like that? And even if they did, don't you think when they rejoined their convent, the other nuns might notice a change in their behavior and act accordingly? For God's sake, Harry!"

"Uh, I really think you're overestimating..."

"No, Harry, I don't think I am! Oh, honestly!" Unable to remain seated, she stood and stalked to the opposite end of the room, folding her arms over her chest. She fumed as she waited for Harry to respond... coldly, or angrily, or whatever... but didn't expect what she heard next.

Harry was chuckling.

She whirled and fixed him with her blackest glare. He appeared not to notice. "Okay, you're right. However the rumor got started, it wasn't through you."

"Oh, thank you," she said witheringly. "And what convinced you...?"

"The way you're acting right now," Harry explained calmly. "If you'd imagined a way you might have let it slip, even accidentally, you wouldn't have suggested the elves as the source, and you wouldn't be so upset. I mean, you were never a very good actress, Hermione." At her scowl, he grinned and said in a falsetto voice,

"You see, Mr. Borgin, Draco Malfoy is my friend, and I want to get him a present, oh but obviously I don't want to buy something if he's already reserved it..."

Hermione couldn't help it; the matching grin broke through her temper as she recalled the incident in Knockturn Alley. "All right, I admit that wasn't exactly one of my more brilliant moments." She uncrossed her arms and put her hands on her hips as she continued to scowl – but only a mock scowl now – at Harry. "And may I just point out, Mr. Potter, that I've had plenty of time to improve my acting skills."

"Now that you're a prosecutor? And a wife and mother? Maybe," allowed Harry, "but not that much, I don't think."

Somewhat mollified, she returned to the sofa. They finished their sandwiches in silence. There was so much they had to say to each other – and Harry's remark about "wife and mother" touched on only one of them – but for the moment, Hermione was content to sit on the sofa and eat.

She was just about to break their silence when Harry did so first. "I couldn't get through the barrier this morning. Even when I hit it with the strongest Reducto spell the Elder Wand could generate."

"Was that when Eldritch and I felt that... shock wave?"

He nodded. "Yeah... some kind of backlash. I felt it too."

"But then – don't wipe your hands on your trousers, Harry, I have serviettes – but then why would the Death Chamber have such an impenetrable barrier over its door? I was certain it was to restrict access to you alone, with the Hallows. So is it just..."

"It's not impenetrable," interrupted Harry. "Someone got through just before I lost patience and tried the Reducto." At Hermione's inquiring expression, he elaborated. "Someone's... soul. Someone had just died, and I could feel their passage. Remember the old man in the inn? It was like that: I felt someone's soul pass through me today. The threnodies were following, but I couldn't quite make out who it was from their song."

She couldn't help gaping at him... not only at what he said, but at his matter-of-fact way of saying it. "Are you saying the Arch is where our souls go when we die?"

He blew out a breath. "Well, we'd already figured it was a portal to the afterlife, didn't we? 'Course, everyone's soul can't go through there: I mean, how many people die every minute, worldwide? There'd be a huge crowd of souls in that case, but I only felt one pass through while I was there."

"Possibly the Arch is only for magical people, and Muggle souls go elsewhere," said Hermione, thinking out loud. "Or maybe there's more of them besides the Arch... legend tells of a cave in Greece, where Heracles and Orpheus made their descents to the Underworld. Or maybe the Arch is merely the druids' means of physically embodying and localizing the portal..."

"My point is, I felt the soul go past me, through me, through the barrier, and into the Arch," Harry concluded. "Whatever the barrier's supposed to keep out, it isn't the spirits of the dead."

"Which raises the question again: what is the barrier keeping out?" Hermione pondered. Neither said anything for a few moments.

"Maybe it's not supposed to keep anything out," Harry finally suggested darkly. "Maybe it's keeping something in."

After delivering his thoughts about the Death Chamber, Harry found himself with nothing else to say – or rather, nothing safe to say. He'd come to the Ministry at Hermione's prompting, but he'd given no thought to what he'd do if her plan had worked – if he had, at one stroke, rid the world of the Deathly Hallows. Uncomfortably, he realized he'd then have no excuse for not rejoining the wizarding world... if he'd stayed away, it would be a true rejection of that world, and everyone in it.

And while Harry didn't care if he never saw some people in the wizarding world ever again, he'd realized in the last few days that there were others who he'd missed... missed very much indeed. Foremost on that list was the bushy-haired inquisitor on whose sofa he was sitting.

So far, their conversation had concentrated on the events of the day – though that included clearing up their misunderstanding about discretion. Harry knew, however, that wouldn't last. He felt reluctant to intrude any further into the affairs of the wizarding world – Hermione's world, if no longer his – and even more reluctant to share the details of his world.

Their lunch concluded, he stood politely and said, "Well, it was a good idea... and I think your notion of other portals is worth checking out. Especially the cave in Greece... maybe it won't have a barrier across it. Thanks loads, Hermione. You still have my emergency number, so..." He made the vague motions usually made by visitors about to take their leave.

"Ah, yes, Howard Seaker's mobile." Hermione laughed but didn't stand along with Harry. "Howard Seaker, Jacob Clayman... how many pseudonyms do you have, Harry?"

He shrugged. "Warren Locke... Nigel Chanter... I thought Hal Jameson was a little too obvious, even for me." He didn't mention others he'd devised, such as Neville Thomas and Ron Granger, which he'd discarded early in his exile as too painful to use.

"But Jacob Clayman was your favorite. Or, at least, you used it longest." Harry must have looked surprised, for she sighed and explained, "How long does it take to advance to sous-chef status, Monsieur Clayman?"

"Years," Harry conceded. Without thinking, he'd reseated himself on the sofa. "Mind you, I had an advantage in my choice of spices. Mallowsweet in particular is good in sauces served with roast lamb, much better than mint, really..."

He stopped as Hermione laughed again. "Oh, Harry, I'm just trying to picture you as a gourmet chef. You must cook for us sometime, honestly. I'd really like to taste your skills."

"Maybe," he hesitated, "maybe someday." He smiled ruefully. "Course, those 'skills' were how I was finally caught, weren't they?"

"I don't suppose it ever occurred to you that wizards might visit a Muggle restaurant." Hermione turned serious. "You cut yourself off so completely..."

This was striking a bit too close to home. Harry tried to make light of it. "Well, after I started having regular contact with Ted, I learned a little bit about what was going on. I only had one restriction: I didn't want to hear anything to do with Quidditch. Mind you, once that had been barred as a topic of conversation, he didn't have a lot to say."

"I daresay you heard a lot about Victoire Weasley, then," she smiled.

"Oh yes."

"Anything..." Hermione hesitated. "Anything else?" She tried to keep the smile on her face, but it kept flickering away.

He gave a half-shrug, not looking at her directly, but at a spot two inches to her left. "Well, I knew about Rose, of course... I suppose she told you about the book I gave her." He dropped the topic... he couldn't say more about Hermione's family life if he wanted to avoid mentioning her marriage to Ron. And everything he could see around him – from the neatness of the room, to its lack of Chudley Cannons memorabilia – told him that, whatever turn Hermione's life had taken, it didn't include Ron at Enthalpy House.

Her penetrating glance suggested that she knew exactly what he wasn't saying. Harry was saved by a timely interruption: a tapping at the window. After a moment's pause, in which she obviously debated whether to ignore the tapping, Hermione rose from the sofa. Going to the window, she opened it to admit an owl with a scroll in its beak.

She took the scroll and, when she saw that the owl was waiting for a reply, unrolled it at once. "It's from Edwin Lovinett," she read aloud to Harry, "the solicitor representing Jack Swivingham. He's requesting a meeting with me and his client, tomorrow, on a matter of the utmost importance and... hm." She glanced up at Harry. "And confidentiality."

"Who's Jack Swivingham?"

She looked momentarily astonished that he should ask. "It's too long to explain," she said. "But he's a criminal I intend to put away for a very long time. The elf you met yesterday will be one of the witnesses against him."

"Sounds like he wants to cut a deal," said Harry encouragingly.

"Yes, it does, doesn't it?" She found a quill, scribbled on the back of the scroll, and handed it to the owl. The owl launched itself out the window. "I'll see him tomorrow at noon," she told Harry, sitting down again. "That'll give me time to work out any details before the trial begins on Monday."

"Well, then." He stood once more, trying to display the signs of imminent departure. "If you're going into the Ministry tomorrow, you'll need a good night's sleep, so..."

"Stay."

He barely heard the single word, she said it so softly.

"Please," she added. Her gaze was steady on him... not pleading, but not at all tentative. "Please. I'd like you to stay."

Somewhere, his voice had gone on holiday. It took Harry a minute, or possibly hours, to find it again. When he did, he responded with a single word of his own. "Ron?"

Hermione turned pink, but didn't avert her gaze. "Ron lives in Diagon Alley, in a flat above their shop. We're..." She cleared her throat and continued, "Yes, we're married, but..." She stopped, looking far less than her usual confident self, and swallowed heavily. "It's a long story," she concluded.

Harry locked eyes with her. "Do you love him?" he asked quietly.

"It's not that simple," she replied, "not anywhere near as simple as that." She said no more, merely waiting... for Harry to make the next move. Which he did, by sitting back down on the sofa near her.

Hermione clasped her hands together and stared at them, as though they contained the words she wanted to say. "Ron and I were married a few years after you'd... after the end of the War," she finally began. "We'd always been close, after all, and he'd seemed to mature so much in the last months of the conflict. I mean, he started to genuinely care about some of my interests. And he, well, he made

me laugh, at a time when I never thought I'd laugh again. He could always do that. And..." She paused.

"And I was dead," Harry nodded.

Her answering nod was filled with a deep sadness. "I'd lost you – I couldn't bear to lose Ron, too. So when he asked me to marry him, I said yes."

Harry could see how it must have been. The War was over, and the losses had been great... the two survivors of the Trio had each clung hard to their one remaining friend.

"But even then – even then, we had some... friction," Hermione continued carefully. Harry could only imagine the disagreements, arguments, and outright fights contained in that one word. "I went back to Hogwarts to finish my seventh year – Ron decided to work for the Wheezes. And when I got my NEWTs and Kingsley offered me a job at the Ministry, Ron found out he couldn't do the same. None of which would've mattered, of course, if only he'd been happy at how it all turned out – but he saw himself taking a second place to me, and he couldn't bear that."

She wasn't looking at Harry now, or at anything in the room. Harry guessed that she was watching scenes from the past – scenes she'd replayed in her mind many, many times over the years. "I don't know what went wrong... or maybe, it was never really right to begin with... but we argued over so much, Harry. Even when I was first working with Kingsley, fighting to correct the most blatant injustices in our government: rights for all magical beings, an end to bloodline discrimination. And at first Ron seemed to genuinely care about my work. But the more time I spent at the Ministry, the less he seemed to care... almost, you know, like he'd used up what to say and couldn't think of anything."

No, Harry reflected, I'd reckon "Twelve Fail-Safe Ways to Charm Witches" wouldn't cover a situation like this. He made very sure to keep the thought to himself.

"So I was putting in more and more time at the Ministry, just to get away from home. And of course, he didn't like that I was advancing in the Ministry so rapidly as a result. It seemed as though every

night was spent in either yelling or not saying anything." Hermione sighed wearily.

"And then you got pregnant with Rose," guessed Harry.

Hermione looked up at him in surprise. "I've been trying to help people... secretly... for a fair few years," Harry explained. "I've watched domestic catastrophes unfold. A baby can either cement a relationship, or blow it apart."

"Don't think for a moment that Ron doesn't love Rose," Hermione said quickly, firmly. "He loves her very much, and so do I. But..."

"But that was the straw that broke the camel's back, as it were?"

"As it were." She sighed again and once more met his gaze. "So, to answer your question: I don't know that I'd call it 'love', but I suppose I do still care for Ron, somewhat. But I can't live with him." She gestured at the room around them. "He moved out when Rose was five."

"But you're still married, then?" For a moment, Harry had to wonder if Hermione had stayed with Ron to avoid damaging her Ministry career – then he rejected the thought as unworthy. Hermione had despised Percy for putting career before family: she would never do that herself.

Her expression turned incredulous for an instant, before she visibly recalled how little he still knew, even after all these years, of the wizarding world. "Vows in the wizarding world are enforced by the users' own magic, Harry. You certainly remember the magically binding contract that kept you in the Triwizard Tournament? Well, if anything, marriage vows are stronger. Ron and I can't divorce – hell, we can't even cheat on each other."

She stood jerkily. "So you see, it's perfectly safe for me to invite another wizard to spend the night in my home. Don't feel any qualms on that account. It's simply that..."

"I never assumed that was your intention, Hermione," he said quietly.

Hermione's words fumbled slightly, then she continued, "It's simply that I'd like to have my oldest friend – whom I'd thought dead for

years and years – I'd like to know that he's close by. That he's alive, and safe, and near. That's all." Though she didn't say it in so many words, there was a sense of Is that so much to ask? in her tone. Harry was quite sure that Hermione wasn't even aware it was there.

She'd shared the details of her life with him... and she'd made her case. She would not ask again, Harry was certain of that. The next move was once more his – and he was acutely aware that his choice would dictate the courses of the rest of their lives, one way or another.

But for the first time in what seemed forever, he felt he really had a rest of his life.

Even before his conscious mind realized he'd made his choice, his mouth was responding with a seeming non-sequitur, delivered from a perfectly straight face. "Eggs?"

She was taken aback. "W-what...?"

"Eggs. Do you keep eggs in your icebox? Maybe some bacon, or some mild cheese? If you don't, I know a little all-night shop in Kensington that has pretty good quality..."

She blinked at him three or four times before a delighted smile spread across her face. "Oh! Um, no, I don't eat breakfast all that often. Um, usually I just grab a pastry on my way to work."

Harry stood and faced her. "Well, if you wouldn't mind decking out the sofa with pillows and such, I'll make a grocery run and be back in two shakes."

It was truly amazing how swiftly she closed the space between them, to envelop him in a massive, spine-cracking hug. And the awkwardness he expected to feel, about putting his arms around her and returning the favor, somehow never materialized.

Chapter XIV: Delicate Negotiations

The omelets were light, almost soufflé-like in their airiness, with veins of molten bleu cheese running through them, and bits of perfectly crisp bacon sprinkled overall. "Small wonder if the girls can't keep their hands off you," joked Hermione as she finished eating, "if this is the sort of breakfast you can cook."

Harry smiled slightly but didn't respond to the jibe. Instead, with a tiny jerk of his head he levitated their empty plates over to the sink. "Coffee?"

"Yes, please." She'd actually had a restful night's sleep, though she wasn't sure the same could be said of Harry: she had got up to use the lavatory around three a.m. and saw that he was lying awake on the sofa, hands folded behind his head, staring at the ceiling. She'd returned to bed without saying anything.

She watched him now over the lip of her cup of coffee, as the dishes and pans cleaned themselves in the sink. The casual ease with which he manipulated magic was impressive, but a topic for another time. Right now, she wanted to discuss his return to the wizarding world – if she could find a safe way to broach the subject. Hermione was reluctant to disturb the concord they'd reached last night.

Habit asserted itself: she started putting amongst the items that had arrived in the post on Saturday. Very quickly she came across the message from Ron. She opened it, started to read, and felt the blush blossom on her face; hastily, she slipped it into the bottom of the stack of papers.

Not hastily enough, unfortunately. "Is that Ron's handwriting?" Harry asked. "What's he have to say?"

"Erm," Hermione said, trying through sheer willpower to keep the blood from rushing to her face, and failing. "It's... a reminder. My birthday."

"Oh, that's right! Your birthday is this week, isn't it? And he's giving you a party? That's pretty good of him..."

"Not exactly. He's... inviting me to a, a private party. As it were." To hell with the blushes, she decided, and raised her head to look straight at him. "We are still married, after all."

It took Harry a moment to decipher her meaning. When he did, it was his turn to blush. "Ohh. So, uh, you're not really, uh, separated, then?"

"We're very much separated, Harry. But as I said last night, our wedding vows are enforced by our own magic." Hermione swallowed a quick gulp of coffee to clear her throat. "I suppose if I were Narcissa Malfoy, I'd have worded my oath to allow occasional 'liaisons', as long they were discreet. Instead, Ron and I were married using the Church of England ceremony – as a concession to my parents, you understand – and it's worded much stricter than the usual wizarding vows."

"Yeah, you said you couldn't cheat on each other. So... that, uh, means no sex at all? For either of you?" Harry was bright red now, and no longer looking directly at her.

"Pretty much," said Hermione, scarlet-faced but determined to get the matter out into the open. "Though there are charms that make objects vibrate..."

"Right. Got it."

"You'd probably have a better idea than I would about Ron's options," she concluded.

He closed his eyes as if in pain. "I'm sorry," he finally said.

"I gather that Arthur's pressuring Ron to have more children," she continued doggedly, taking a perverse amusement from his embarrassment. "A son, this time – to carry on the Weasley family name, you know. So far, all but one of Arthur's grandchildren have been girls. I don't feel we should have any more children, given how our marriage has turned out, but you know Ron..."

"Please. Enough."

"Welcome back to my world, Harry. It hasn't been all skittles and beer while you've been gone." Hermione saw the opening in the

conversation and took advantage of it... gambling that his current discomfort would leave him ready to make concessions. "So... when do you plan to let everyone know?"

"Let everyone know?" Harry blinked at the change of subject. The blush faded rapidly as his eyes came back to look at her again. "That I'm 'back', you mean? Hermione, I'm... I'm not..."

"You're not coming back? Is that what you're trying to tell me, Harry? Because if you..."

He raised his hand, palm towards her, in a quieting motion that was an unmistakable command. The several logical arguments she'd been primed to deliver came to a screeching halt, tumbling over one another in her head. Quite uncharacteristically, she fell silent and let him speak.

It took Harry a second or two to find the words. When he did, they carried an air of quiet authority very similar to Kingsley's. "I'm not 'back' until the Hallows are gone. The whole point of not coming back was to destroy their power – especially the Wand's. Until then..."

Blast. Unfortunately, the same rationale that had kept him away for all these years was still in force, and she'd never convince him otherwise. Nonetheless, she voiced her challenge. "So what was yesterday, then, if you're not returning to the wizarding world?"

Surprise flashed over his face. "Yesterday was you asking," he said simply, as though it were obvious.

Hermione would not allow herself to feel the glow of pleasure at his words. "And what if, tomorrow, Ron asks?"

"Ron won't ask, because Ron won't know."

True. Ron may have been present when I questioned Ted, but he won't know for certain unless I tell him – and I promised to keep Harry's existence secret. She couldn't help pressing, "Or Ginny?"

"Pfft."

The dismissive snort wasn't what Hermione had expected. "Really?" she asked in tones of disbelief. "Because when last I saw the two of you, you certainly seemed to be in love."

"It was fifteen years ago," Harry said shortly. "People change."

You don't know the half of it, thought Hermione. She knew she should drop the matter, change the subject. But his sudden change in attitude – in a heartbeat, he'd turned testy, almost surly – and his casual dismissal of opportunities lost, annoyed her for no reason she could name.

"Yes, I suppose you must have changed," she said sweetly. "A Muggle, a success in your field, and obviously single? You must have had your pick of women, Harry. Fifteen years..."

He shook his head in warning. He was definitely not smiling, as he had at her earlier jibe.

She paid no heed, irrationally determined now to get under his skin, irritate him as he'd irritated her. If I have to reveal the secrets of my sex life, so does he. "Why, you probably wouldn't even have any trouble picking them up. A simple spell to stimulate libido, I imagine? All that magic does have its uses, I see..."

The room's temperature abruptly plummeted. The chill seemed to radiate from Harry: his body language, his face, his eyes. Hermione realized she'd crossed the line, but it was too late. Even his voice was icy now. "I've been using the Elder Wand," he told her, "all the Hallows, to help people. To try and make up for some of the wrong things that've been done to them in the name of magic – even if they never realized it."

He stood. "In fact, there are a couple of 'projects' I've been working on, that I've neglected. I should probably attend to them... and you, I daresay, need to be getting to the Ministry for your meeting."

He didn't simply Disapparate away – that would have been as rude as slamming down a Muggle telephone. But his curt exit, walking from the room to Disapparate a moment later, was just as final a last word.

Though she truly wasn't in the mood for it, she kept her appointment in the Ministry atrium. Edwin Lovinett, junior partner of the legal firm Gouging & Lovinett, was waiting for her there. He was a prim, middle-aged wizard, fastidious and precise, in a robe of conservative cut. Hermione had a hard time reconciling his respectable appearance with the clientele he represented... starting with the Malfoys just after the War's end, and continuing up to his current client.

"Ah, Madam Granger-Weasley," he greeted her, shifting his briefcase so that he could extend a hand to shake. "So good of you to see me on such short notice. My client was most desirous to discuss matters with you, without the distractions of a courtroom. Thank you again."

"Not at all," she said, forcing a smile. "Shall we?" She gestured towards the lifts.

They took the lifts to the ninth level, walking past the Department of Mysteries to the courtrooms, and thence to the prisoner holding cells. Lovinett made some attempts at conversation, almost as a professional duty, but Hermione really wasn't up for verbal fencing. She was trying too hard to banish the memories of the morning, and her abominable treatment of Harry.

They arrived at the cells: a barred door with a guard's desk beside it, opening to a corridor of barred doors. A burly MLE agent sat at the desk, reading the Sunday Prophet. He looked up as they approached. "Morning, ma'am," he said to Hermione.

"Good morning, Nelson – or rather, good afternoon," she replied, handing him her wand. Lovinett did the same: wands, after all, weren't permitted in the holding cells, for obvious reasons. There were charms to prevent unauthorized wands from passing the guard desk.

Together, Hermione and Lovinett waited as Nelson carefully weighed their wands, handed them receipts, and slid the wands onto a rack. They would retrieve their wands when they emerged from the cells.

Nelson turned his head to look at the barred door. "Open," he told it, and then as it clanged open he called out down the corridor, "Open

number five!" With a grunt he nodded for them to proceed, as he returned to his newspaper.

I hope I don't have to speak to Robards about lax discipline in his ranks, thought Hermione as she walked down the cellblock. Nelson was hardly paying attention at all... and he should be escorting us to Swivingham's cell.

The cell was hardly luxurious, but here and there she spotted a few items of comfort: a form-fitting bed instead of a cot, a linen tablecloth for the area where the Ministry elves brought meals. They were clear evidence that the current occupant was used to the finer things in life, and was able to obtain them even in prison. He was lounging on the bed, humming to himself, when Hermione and Lovinett walked in. "Ah, if it isn't the ever-charming Witch Who Won," he laughed. "Welcome back, lass."

Jack Swivingham was a large man, well over six feet tall, broad-shouldered and bulky. His ebullient manner and booming voice filled any room with his presence. Still, his pot belly bespoke a lack of physical exercise, and he'd evidently been treating his thinning hair with potions – his stay in cells had caused his hairline to recede drastically.

Hermione turned one of the cell's chairs to face Swivingham and settled herself into it without waiting for Lovinett. "You called this meeting," she told Swivingham, getting immediately to business. "What's on your mind?"

Swivingham sat up on the bed as Lovinett moved the other chair closer to him. "I hear that Harry Potter's come back to life."

"So rumor has it," agreed Hermione unhelpfully.

"Which has confused my poor house-elves into thinking they have to appear at the trial," Swivingham continued mournfully. "I have to say, Granger, that was a clever ploy on your part."

"I wish I could claim credit for it," Hermione noted. "Not that I hadn't more than sufficient evidence to send you to Azkaban without their testimony, but it'll certainly make my job that much easier." She smiled at Lovinett. "And yours, I'm not sorry to say, that much harder."

"Ahem. That is why my client has requested this meeting," said Lovinett, opening his briefcase. "In exchange for a reduced sentence, he will agree to plead guilty to a lesser charge of..."

"No," Swivingham interrupted.

Lovinett stared at his client in concern. "Jack," he said softly, "don't throw away this last opportunity..."

"I won't," said Swivingham. "I intend to take full advantage of it." He leaned forward and looked at Hermione with a hardening face. All traces of jollity were gone from his voice when he spoke again. "In exchange for total immunity from prosecution, I'll give you the Lords."

"The Lords?"

"Of the Cartel. The real one."

Hermione was confused, but would not allow herself to show it. "Swivingham, it's well known that you ran all the under-traffic in Knockturn Alley. The prostitution ring was only one part of it – there were drugs, fencing..."

"Did I run all that?" Swivingham grinned. "Strange that you didn't charge me with anything but procurement, then. But let me offer you some food for thought." He gestured with both hands, miming a petite female figure. "Fatima. Probably the best looking of my 'working elves', wouldn't you say? From a human point of view, anyway. And – let me guess – probably the least communicative of the six you've got." He waited for Hermione to acknowledge his point. Her silence was acknowledgement enough. "Didn't you ever wonder how a British house-elf received such a... Levantine name?"

Swivingham smiled again as Hermione fixed her most penetrating stare on him. He had her full interest now, and he knew it. "Here's another example: you know the sorts of drugs available in Knockturn Alley. Silverleaf. Runecap extract. I hear you can even acquire some Muggle drugs. Their new synthetics don't do much for magical metabolisms, of course, but the classic organic-growns are always popular – blond hashish is the current favorite. Do they even grow cannabis in Britain, I wonder?"

"This... would have to go far beyond Knockturn Alley," Hermione said slowly. "You're talking about a major international cartel. And you're, what, second-in-command?"

"Ah, Granger, you flatter me. I do run the businesses here in Britain... regional manager, if you like. But I take my orders from the Lords. How would you like to get your hands on them? Promise me immunity and a free ticket out of here, and I'll give you names, dates, bank accounts, everything you'll need to go after them." Swivingham sat back, quite satisfied with the impact of his words.

Hermione was thinking furiously. To accept Swivingham's offer would mean not prosecuting him for procurement or running the prostitution ring – the strategy by which she'd hoped to strike a blow for elf rights. But if there were an international criminal cartel doing business in Britain – throughout Europe – that would be too great a target to ignore.

"You're asking me to buy a pig in a poke," she shot at him. "Any promises of immunity would have to depend on the level of cooperation we got... and how effective your information turned out to be."

"Oh, it's good, sweetheart," Swivingham assured her. "Trust me, it's good. By the same token, I want that promise of immunity in writing. This is where you come in," he added as an aside to Lovinett.

"As your legal counsel, Jack," Lovinett replied in a low voice, "I have to strongly advise against entering any agreement like this with the current Ministry..." He glanced at Hermione under lowered brows, and she understood he was requesting privacy. She stood and stepped outside the cell door, swinging it nearly shut; she scrupulously looked away from them, as they conferred in low voices.

Eventually, Lovinett called Hermione back into the cell. Both men were very tense – Lovinett's face was pinched in disapproval, while Swivingham had broken out in sweat – but seemed ready to conclude the deal. "I can draw up an instrument right here," Lovinett began stiffly, "if you care to call in the guard as a witness..."

"Actually," put in Hermione, "any agreement of this magnitude needs to be co-signed by the Head of Magical Law Enforcement. I can contact Robards as soon as we're done here... we should certainly have something ready for everyone's signature tomorrow morning, before the court convenes."

"Good enough," said Swivingham, wiping his brow. "I'd insist on getting Shacklebolt's agreement, too," he added candidly, "except I don't think he's going to be around long enough to keep his end of the bargain."

Hermione sniffed disdainfully. "We'll see you in the morning, then, Swivingham," she told him. "Oh, and do please bear in mind: if so much as one word of your information is dodgy, the whole deal's off, and you're back in the dock." She led Lovinett out of the cell – the door automatically shut behind them – and out of the cellblock.

"No further visitors until tomorrow," she instructed Nelson, as she retrieved her wand. "Mr. Lovinett, while I'm sure this wasn't what either of us had in mind for today's meeting, I think we can call it productive. If you'll come by my office tomorrow morning, we can hammer out the final details of the agreement."

She all but flew back to her office and wrote a précis of the day's meeting, which she promptly owled to Robards. Hermione wanted the matter done and the decision out of her hands, a fait accompli. It would be a Pyrrhic victory: Magical Law Enforcement would get kudos for eradicating a criminal cartel, but at the cost of losing a round in her long fight for elvish rights.

In particular, she dreaded having to explain to Canby that all his efforts preparing for the trial – including his work with the witnesses – had been for naught... and that the elves were no closer to emancipation than before.

It was late in the evening when Harry Apparated back to Enthalpy House. The house was silent and dark, and at first he wasn't sure he'd be welcome. He'd been snappish and cold with Hermione over breakfast, refusing to share details of his life although she'd been sharing hers... in the end, leaving in a huff without even letting her speak – or explaining himself.

How could he possibly explain about Ginny? It had taken him years to figure it out himself – he had no idea how he might explain it to anyone else. To Hermione. Or to the Weasleys, for that matter.

But if Harry ever did find a way to return to the wizarding world, he'd better also find a way to explain. Certainly Ginny deserved the explanation, if no one else.

He was reassured to see the sofa had been decked out with pillows and coverlet, again... Hermione had expected (hoped?) he'd be returning tonight. Harry could hardly blame her for not waiting up for him – if for no other reason than that it postponed their inevitable discussion/apology session until morning.

A quick Transfiguration changed his Muggle street clothes into pyjamas, as he'd done the night before. Almost out of habit he set protective spells around the house: he might not be sleeping in his Stealth Cloak any more, but he wasn't about to neglect his defenses. He was making ready to climb under the coverlet when he heard a sound in the silent house.

The unmistakable sound of Hermione weeping.

It gave him a moment of queasy hesitation. He'd never been comfortable with crying females, never known what to do – but he'd had fifteen years to learn, a little. And he bitterly remembered his failure to console Hermione, when Ron had left her crying in the Forest of Dean.

Quietly he went to the door of Hermione's bedroom. It was closed but unlocked; he opened it enough to pop his head into the room. In the darkness he could make out Hermione on her bed, softly weeping. Harry couldn't tell if she knew he was there.

He slipped inside, hesitated again, then noiselessly stepped to her bedside and knelt there. Hermione's back was to him; he could now make out that she was curled up slightly, hugging a pillow. It helped, somehow, that she wasn't looking at him – in that disconcertingly direct way she had – and the darkness of the room helped, too.

Keeping his touch feather-light, he began to stroke her hair. She hiccupped once, then the crying continued unabated. She wasn't

going to tell him why she was crying, then... but he thought he could guess.

Harry drew a deep breath. "I'm afraid to come back," he said, his voice barely more than a whisper. "It's the Hallows, yeah, but not just the Hallows, it's... I was born under a prophecy, and I fulfilled it. I almost feel like, without the prophecy, what use am I to the wizarding world now? At least the Muggles I can help."

Her weeping had slowed. She was listening, then. "And I was sure... well, I'd convinced myself... that no one would miss me. That you'd all, y'know, get on with your lives. I hoped you'd remember me occasionally, but really, you were better off without me." He fell silent, simply stroking her hair, ever so gently.

Hermione was sniffling now, not crying. After a minute, she spoke in a voice no louder than Harry's. "When you died – that day when Voldemort and his Death Eaters came out of the Forest, and Hagrid carried your body for us to see..." She said no more, and Harry wondered if she would continue.

She whispered, "I died too."

As there didn't seem to be anything to say to this, Harry said nothing. He knew Hermione was incapable of leaving it at that.

"Part of me just... died, Harry. I'd dedicated my life to helping you – in Hogwarts, and then I gave up Hogwarts, I Obliviated my own parents – I gave up Ron to help you. When I thought you'd died, it was like there was a hole inside me where you should have been – a hole that never healed. Don't ever think you weren't missed, or that you have no value. Don't..."

Another pause. "Don't ever think you weren't loved," she finished.

He sensed she was done for the moment. My turn again. Harry let the silence settle into place for a time, while he gathered his thoughts. He paused in stroking her hair, and began to lift his hand from her head.

"Don't stop," she quickly added.

With a mental shrug, he resumed his stroking. I suppose it's because she's a cat person, he mused, that's why she likes this.

"About Ginny," he began, and felt her stiffen under his hand. He tried to put his hard-earned thoughts into order: if there was anyone he could explain this to, it was Hermione. "Something happened that year, and I don't know... I don't know if it was all the fighting, or the fact that I was getting ready to die – they do say that clears the mind, don't they? But... I didn't want her near me in the battle. And when Voldemort made his ultimatum, and I went to him in the Forest... to die... well, I saw Ginny, and I could have said goodbye. I could have comforted her when Fred died, too. I could have done... lots of things... but the point is, I didn't."

"I see."

"And it took me years to understand, but I know now... I didn't really love Ginny, not really. I never did. There was a lot of lust, I know that now, lust on both our parts, I think. We were teenagers. But... I didn't know anything about love, Hermione. I mean, I wasn't about to learn it from the Dursleys, was I? It took me years to figure that out."

"I see." Pause. Then she rolled over in bed to face him. It was too dark to make out her expression, but her eyes were shining. "And now?"

"I've helped a lot of people who needed help. I've seen people who stayed by each other, no matter how hard things got. If that was love... then I guess I know what love is. Love is putting the other person first. Isn't it? You'd know better than me."

Slowly, cautiously, her hand came up to touch his face. "Maybe once," she whispered, "but not now." His eyes must be adjusting to the darkness, finally: he could see a tentative smile make its way to her face. It disappeared as she turned solemn. "I am so sorry for what I said this morning, Harry."

He let his hand come to rest onto her head, no longer a stroke, but a caress. "Me too. For what I said. For.. for everything, y'know? Then and now. I... I should have trusted you."

With a smile no longer tentative, Hermione took his hand between both of her own, snuggled with it into her mattress, and closed her

eyes. Experimentally, Harry tried to withdraw his hand; she clutched in the more firmly, like a youngster with a beloved, comforting stuffed toy.

Harry concluded that the sofa wasn't for him tonight. With a wistful sigh, he Accio'd his pillow from the other room and settled into a sitting position by the side of her bed... his hand still clasped between hers.

Oh, he'd be stiff in the morning, but he'd spent worse nights... and there were many kinds of comfort.

XV: A Strike at the Heart

Being both Monday morning, and the day she'd either close the deal with Swivingham or open his trial, Hermione didn't expect as fancy a breakfast as yesterday's, just her usual pastry and coffee. Pastries she got, but they'd been Apparated in from Paris; coffee she got, but it was brewed from Kona beans, freshly ground.

A girl could get used to this, and she immediately squelched the thought before it could go any further.

She spent a moment checking the morning post – there to find Robards's response to her owl, agreeing to the plea bargain and grant of immunity for Swivingham. Hermione had expected he'd jump at the immediate win without worrying about their long-term goals, but the fact still dejected her.

Ce qui sera, sera, she sighed to herself, and slipped Robards's letter into a folder. She added a note to the guard staff at the holding cells, to increase the security on Swivingham until all the deal's details were made final. If he's telling the truth about these Cartel Lords, he may be at risk once his evidence becomes public. The folder went into her briefcase.

"Good luck today," Harry offered as he stood from the table. He'd "dressed Muggle" again, in clothes that suggested country rather than city.

"Thanks. Will you be, er...?"

"'Field work' today? Yeah, and probably tonight, too. There's this old couple in the Lowlands, they've owned and run a dairy farm for fifty years or more, and they don't really want to sell it, but it's hard times for small farms these days..."

"I get the picture," she smiled. "There's a spell for increasing milk production, by the way: Lactus. Of course, it's usually intended for new mothers who've just had twins, but there's no reason it shouldn't work on dairy cows."

"Lactus," Harry repeated. "Thanks..." He hesitated, then added, "And thanks for... well..."

"No, Harry, thank you." Her smile turned warmer. "When I think of how miserable I was when I went to bed last night, and how much better I feel this morning..."

"Yeah. I know what you mean." He took a step towards her, hesitated, then slowly – giving her every opportunity to decline – leaned forward to lightly kiss the top of her head. Far from declining, Hermione closed her eyes and gave a soft hum of contentment. Harry quickly straightened and stepped back; he opened his mouth to say something, but no words emerged. Instead, he gave her a shy smile before turning and leaving the room to Disapparate away.

For a rarity, Hermione took a few moments to linger over her coffee. She couldn't help the smile that spread itself over her face, she couldn't suppress it if she tried – and she didn't want to try. She didn't remember the last time she'd slept so peacefully, so blissfully. Even some of her nights with Ron, where she'd lain in welcome post-coital languor, didn't compare to last night, simply falling asleep with Harry's hand pressed between hers.

Harry had never been comfortable with feelings, neither his own nor others'... his aunt and uncle had seen to that (and that blasted Cloak hadn't helped matters any). Certainly, he'd never liked talking about them: it had always been through Harry's actions that he'd made his feelings known. So last night's admissions, she sensed, had been a tremendous breakthrough for both of them. Hermione hoped Harry felt better for it – she knew she did. She still felt a residuum of anger over their past – issues of abandonment and mutual boneheadedness, she admitted it – but the anger had been washed clean of bitterness.

Healing had begun.

Of course, he won't be staying around for long, she mused. He still thinks he has to avoid the wizarding world, as the only way to avoid any confrontation that might lose him the Wand. I'll have to work on that. There must be a way of eliminating it without Harry dying! He survived Voldemort, he can survive this, too! He has to!

She paused. Something about that last thought... something about Harry, about Voldemort... it niggled at her subconscious. Hermione tried to bring it out for inspection, but for the moment it eluded her. She waited a few seconds to see if it would surface on its own...

then she gave a mental shrug and went back to her preparations for what promised to be an important day at the Ministry.

Once at the Ministry, Hermione set a brisk pace, not pausing to talk to any of those who might delay or distract her. She went first to her office, and immediately wrote the warning for the guard staff. Increased security – two guards, not one – for this week at least, she thought, as she folded the note into an airplane and sent it on its way. And eventual witness relocation, possibly – again, assuming Swivingham's telling the truth.

Next, she sat down to draft the agreement with Swivingham. It took only two drafts; the final wording went into the folder with Robards's message, which she tucked under her arm as she headed for the lifts to the ninth level.

At the holding cells, she surrendered her wand to the guard – Ferrers, it was today – and made her way to Cell Five. When the cell door opened, she stepped inside – and froze in horror.

Swivingham was hanging by his neck from the ceiling, his belt a makeshift noose, his eyes rolled back, his tongue black and protruding.

"Ferrers!" yelled Hermione. "Ferrers!" The guard ran up, coming to a full stop at the sight of Swivingham's corpse. "I want Forensics down here now," she ordered him. "I want the duty roster for last night – the names of everyone on duty from DMLE. And send word to Head Robards – he'll want to see this for himself." Ferrers gratefully took his leave, while Hermione stood stock-still in the cell doorway, wishing she dared disturb the crime scene by looking for her own clues.

I guess Swivingham was telling the truth, she thought morbidly.

In remarkably short order, four MLE investigators, including a somber Dennis Creevey, had lowered Swivingham's body to the floor. Two began to run tests on it; the third began to cast spells around the cells, testing to be sure its Anti-Apparation wards were intact. Hermione watched, staying well out of the way, as Creevey approached the cell door itself. "Tempori Incantatem," he said, tapping it with his wand. A stream of mist issued from the lock, coalescing into five tiny, translucent clocks: time marks. Hermione

knew that the first clock showed the time of her own arrival, minutes before.

Gawain Robards entered the cell block and joined Hermione, watching the forensics team at work. One of the medical analysts spotted him and trotted over. "First-level spells complete, sir," she reported in clipped tones. "Cause of death is exactly what it appears to be. Broken vertebrae, slow strangulation – death by hanging. No other trauma or injuries."

"Time of death, Franklin?" asked Robards.

Franklin, the analyst, glanced over at her teammate, who had just completed another test. He nodded affirmatively. "Between midnight and two," Franklin replied. "Could be a bit earlier, but can't be much later. We'll know more after we get the body to the morgue."

"But why?" wondered Hermione quietly to Robards, as they stepped out of the cell to allow the analysts room to work. "Why would he commit suicide? Now, of all times?"

Robards shook his head. "He must've heard the rumors, and known that the elves were going to testify against him after all. He knew he was going to Azkaban, and decided he couldn't face it – and took the easy way out." At Hermione's stunned look, he elaborated, "It's happened before, after all. I recall one prisoner, at the end of the First Voldemort War, accused of being a fairly high-ranking Death Eater – he slit his wrists with a chicken bone."

Hermione shuddered at the image, but pressed her point. "No, but I'm talking about his plea bargain. If he was so willing to cut a deal Sunday afternoon, why kill himself Sunday night? It makes no sense!" She turned to Creevey, and so missed Robards's puzzled look. "Who else came into this cell last night?"

Creevey gestured with his wand, and the log book from the front guard desk came into his waiting hands. He flipped its pages, checking them against the miniature clocks by the cell door. "According to Tempori Incantatem, before you arrived this morning – the door was last opened..." He glanced down at the log book. "...when you and Lovinett interviewed him yesterday at noon."

"No, I mean since then."

"Nothing since then... until you opened the door this morning."

"No... that's not possible. Someone had to've come in, killed Swivingham, and made it look like suicide. He wouldn't have killed himself, after cutting a deal with us!"

"What deal?" asked Robards.

"The..." Hermione stopped and stared at her superior. "The plea bargain," she said slowly, "granting him immunity from prosecution in exchange for information against his own bosses. The Lords."

"His... 'bosses'? Granger, I thought Swivingham was the boss in Knockturn Alley! And no plea bargain would have been valid without my approval!"

Without saying another word, Hermione opened her folder and produced Robards's message. She handed it to him silently and waited for him to read it.

Robards's face showed confused shock when he looked back to Hermione. "This... is my handwriting... but... but I never wrote this."

"I think you did," said Hermione, quietly but forcefully. "I think you've forgotten. I think we need to see the Spell Reversal specialists." She grasped his forearm. "And I think we need to go now."

Robards started to protest, but Hermione was no longer listening. "Creevey, have one of our Legilimens meet us at Spell Reversal. Ferrers, you'll have to accompany us, too – we need to be able to clear you. You relieved Nelson when you started your shift, yes? Good. Grimaldi! Bones! Find Nelson and bring him here on the double – and be warned, he may be a fugitive at this point, so use appropriate caution, but bring him!" She waited just long enough to receive acknowledgements of her orders, then she left the cell block briskly – pulling her superior along behind her.

"If anyone else had tried to tell me this," Kingsley Shacklebolt said, two hours later, "I would have dismissed it out of hand." His keen gaze went from Hermione to Robards, before settling on Peasegood, the Ministry's foremost expert on Memory Charms. "You're absolutely certain, Arnold?"

"No question of it, Minister," replied Peasegood. "His memory has definitely been altered. Whoever Obliviated him knew what they were about: the lost memory was erased promptly, before it had time to imprint from his short-term to long-term engrams. Within the last twelve to eighteen hours, I'd guess."

Shacklebolt nodded thoughtfully. "Last night, then. That makes sense: they'd have to do it before our weekly briefing this morning. You'd certainly have told me and the other Heads about this plea bargain with Swivingham. And – correct me if I'm wrong, Arnold – it would've been much harder to Obliviate many people than just one."

"If you want their altered memories to still match, yes."

"Hmm. And no chance of recovering whatever was Obliviated?"

Peasegood pursed his lips. "I wouldn't say no chance, Minister, but slim. St. Mungo's has been working on Gilderoy Lockhart for over twenty years, and he's only just started to regain a few genuine memories."

"Which means no way of telling who did this to me," said Robards angrily, "except it was probably someone I trusted enough to let into my home!"

"Well, it could have been done through the window, or even the Floo," said Shacklebolt. "What puzzles me, Granger, is why it wasn't done to you as well."

"The standard Ministry security spells set on my home were recently... augmented," replied Hermione carefully. It seemed the most likely explanation: given the habits of secrecy Harry had developed over the years, it would've been very much in character for him to have added his defenses to her own. At least, she hoped that was the explanation, and not Well, the culprits had broken into my house and were about to Obliviate me when they spotted Harry Potter, raised from the dead and sitting by my bed!

"Well done. Now we need to do the same for the Ministry's internal security," Shacklebolt said forcefully. He abruptly broke off in a series of rough hacking coughs. Immediately, his attendant Healer stepped forward with a goblet of potion.

"You need to calm yourself, sir," she told him in a low voice as he sipped. "The stress..."

"I know," he replied, equally quiet. "Just keep me going for a few more days, Emily, that's all I ask." He handed the goblet back to her, wiped his lips with the back of his hand, and returned to the matter at hand. "Arnold, I want you to work with our Legilimens on Ferrers. Make certain his memory's whole, and that he's telling the truth. When we find Nelson, I'll want the same done for him." His stern nod was a dismissal.

Shacklebolt waited until Peasegood had left the office before he resumed. "If not for Gawain's Obliviation, I would have accepted Swivingham's death as suicide. Hell, I still can't see how it could have been anything else. He was alone in his cell. No one went in that night, and there was a guard outside the cell block. He..."

"Did he have dinner?" interrupted Robards.

Hermione glanced at the analysts' preliminary report. "Yes, curried lamb."

"So someone could get into the cell," said Robards grimly.

"The Ministry house elves?" Hermione whirled on the Head of Enforcement, prepared to deliver a stinging indignant lecture, but Shacklebolt cut her off.

"Our elves need not have been culpable," he pointed out. "They might have simply delivered his food, as usual – and the food could have been doctored. You know as well as I that there are potions that cause severe depression." Hermione nodded in agreement; Harry had described to her the potion Dumbledore had been forced to drink, the night of his death. "Which the flavor of the curry would've hidden. Swivingham could easily have been driven to suicide that way."

"We'll have to wait until all the autopsy tests are done, then," said Hermione, ceding the point. "I'll instruct Franklin to check for mood-altering potions." She glared at Robards. "I cannot believe the Ministry elves would murder anyone."

"I wasn't thinking of the Ministry elves, exactly," said Robards, not flinching before Hermione's glare. "There are six other elves who might welcome the chance to strike back at their former master. They were, after all, prepared to testify against him... maybe their change of heart went a little further."

Hermione was rendered speechless for a moment. But only a moment. "Not possible! I've worked with those girls..."

"If it wasn't elves, and it wasn't suicide, then it had to have been one of the guards on duty," Robards retorted. "No one else came into the cell block, and no one opened Swivingham's door!"

"It could have been done through the bars of the door," Hermione shot back. "A really powerful mood-altering spell, a solid Imperius Curse, an Hallucino Hex...!"

"Again, that means one of the guards. All of those spells require wands, and visitors surrender their wands before they enter the cell block. Only the guards are armed."

"It almost doesn't matter," ruled Shacklebolt. "What matters is that a prisoner in Ministry custody died last night! Bad enough if it was merely lax security on the part of Magical Law Enforcement – but your Obliviation, Gawain, proves it was more than that. I think..." He paused, considering. "I think we must take Swivingham's story as fact. Lords of an international Cartel – who wanted Swivingham dead before he could spill their secrets."

"Which is all well and good, sir," said Robards, "except that the only evidence of such a Cartel was Swivingham's word. We hadn't a clue of their existence before that."

"I would imagine that we had clues, but too few to detect any pattern to them," replied the Minister. His manner turned formal, decisive, that of a born leader; only the tremor of one hand betrayed his body's weakness. "We need to work through the International Confederation of Wizards, see what other Ministries might have uncovered, pool our information. Mr. Robards, work with Mr. Kerricks to arrange a conference this week – give it your top priority. Thank you."

"Thank you, Minister," Robards and Hermione murmured, as they turned to leave.

"A moment, Madam Granger," added the Minister. He waited for Robards to exit before he softly said, "All right there, Hermione?"

Hermione nodded, half-smiling. This was no longer the Minister of Magic for the United Kingdom; this was her friend Kingsley, her comrade-in-arms from the days of the Phoenix, terminally ill but valiant to the end. "I'm fine, Kingsley. Oh, I was upset that we lost the chance to bring the elves closer to freedom, but..."

"But that day will come. There'll be other chances," nodded Kingsley. He paused, lost in memory. "We've worked so hard together, you and I, Hermione. We have made great strides... more opportunities for Muggleborns, goblins on the Wizengamot... have faith, the day will come." He held out his hand; Hermione clasped it gently. "But you know as well as I do, I won't be here to see that day. No," he spoke over Hermione's protest, "be honest. If I see Christmas, I'll be lucky. Hermione – will you be up to finishing the job? No matter who the Wizengamot chooses to succeed me?"

She understood what he was saying... and who he believed his successor would likely be. Particularly given the lead role the Department of International Cooperation would have in any investigation of the Cartel Lords. "Kingsley, trust me, if Blaise Zabini gets in my way, I will skin him alive and hang his hide on my wall. I'll reserve a place of honor for it."

"Good girl." Kingsley closed his eyes momentarily, as he let go of Hermione's hand. "Now, if you'd just send in my secretary... we're going to have to explain to the press exactly why the Trial of the Century has been cancelled. And I have to decide whether to maintain the suicide story – for now, anyway – or announce he was killed by persons unknown. A preemptive strike, as it were, so that we control the story before it leaks. Not that I'm looking forward to the Prophet's inevitable sneers about our security..."

"I'll leave you to it, then," said Hermione. As she made her way to the door, she saw the Healer heading for Shacklebolt's chair, a new goblet in hand.

XVI: Fairy Tale Lessons

Bedtime stories had never been part of Harry's nightly ritual during childhood. The Dursleys wouldn't have wasted their time with him, for one thing; besides, most children's stories involved magic, which was anathema on Privet Drive. So it wasn't until he'd started primary school that Harry learned of the Brothers Grimm – and their tale of the Elves and the Shoemaker.

From the first, Harry had always wondered why the shoemaker didn't grow lazy and dependent on the elves, and be unable to fend for himself once they'd left. (If Uncle Vernon had been the shoemaker, that's exactly what would've happened.) Harry took the tale to heart, now, in his role as guardian angel: use the power of the Deathly Hallows to benefit, not curse – but don't leave the beneficiary worse off than before.

In the case of the Cheswrights, the old dairy farming couple, Harry had to be sure that their current problems were more due to bad luck than bad habits. Once he'd satisfied himself of that, he happily spent the day subtly increasing milk production on their farm. Harry was sure just a few days' extra milk would let the Cheswrights pay their immediate bills – and so keep their farm for at least another year.

Mind you, Harry never questioned why the elves would help the shoemaker in his time of need. To Harry, that part of the story was self-evident.

The sun had just slipped under the horizon when Harry called it quits for the day. He debated for a moment whether to return to Jacob Clayman's flat to sleep – no reason not to, after all, it's still mine; the rent's been paid until the end of the month – but decided he should at least check in with Hermione first. As a courtesy.

He Apparated to Enthalpy House to find Hermione sitting listlessly on the couch, with Bottlebrush nearby watching her intently. The contents of her briefcase were strewn across the low table in front of her; the evening edition of the Daily Prophet lay folded on the couch next to her. She looked up and smiled at Harry's arrival, but the smile didn't make it into her eyes. "H'lo, Harry. How did it go today? Any luck?"

"I think so, yeah. I used the Lactus spell you taught me, but gradually, so it won't look too strange. I even had to switch from the Elder Wand to my old holly wand, just to keep it low-key. In a day or two, I'll taper off just as gradually, and that'll be that." Harry frowned slightly as Hermione didn't seem to respond to the good news. "Hermione... what's wrong?"

With a dejected sigh, Hermione handed him the Prophet. He unfolded it to see banner headlines: KNOCKTURN KINGPIN KILLS SELF! Swivingham suicide tables trial! Ministry in disarray – sloppy security faulted! There was a photograph, presumably from the paper's files, of a large man, bold-eyed and grinning, who nonetheless showed signs of fraying around his handsome edges from living too high. "This... this is the bloke you were going to put away, right? The same bloke whose solicitor sent the owl on Saturday, asking for a deal?"

"Yes, that would be him." Hermione accepted the newspaper back from Harry and dropped it on the table. Neither of them noticed that she moved slightly on the couch to make room for him, or that he sat next to her without hesitation. "But despite what the Prophet says, Harry, it was no suicide. Swivingham was murdered, right in his cell." She gave him a summary of the discovery of the body, and the facts that had been uncovered to date. Harry listened, growing more and more shocked.

"I don't want to accuse any of the house-elves," she finished, almost in despair, "but if it was one of them, they certainly had good excuse. The only other suspect is a human – Eddie Nelson, one of the guards on duty that night – and he's not to be found. Which Robards is practically taking as proof of guilt."

"Uh huh... I'd wondered why the Prophet has Robards practically breathing fire here. Appointing a review board for the Ministry's security, vowing to..." He glanced at the paper on the table. "'To spare no effort to prevent future occurrences', he quoted. "Yeah, when he'd like to tell them that he intends to nail the killer, or something. You're sure this is something to keep secret?"

"For the moment. The news will break later this week – we're trying to get some international help – but for now, at least, it lets us control the story."

"Um. Any chance it really was suicide, not murder?"

"Not really. The killer, or killers, were trying to keep Swivingham from giving evidence about these so-called Cartel Lords. They Obliviated Robards and snatched my letter to him, which took some pretty cool nerve..." Hermione stopped and regarded Harry in appraisal. "Did you do something to my protective spells last night?"

"Er, yeah. Force of habit, I guess, I always set up extra defensive wards when I sleep... especially now that I'm not sleeping in the Cloak..."

"It wasn't a criticism, Harry, far from it! Your wards are probably the only thing that kept me from being Obliviated! If that had happened, we'd never have known about the Cartel Lords at all – no memory of a plea bargain, no written record, nothing."

"Well, good," began Harry, then stopped in dismay. "Wait, though, doesn't that mean they'll still be after you? They must know that they didn't succeed last night. Although... don't Memory Charms work best when the memory is recent?"

"Before it's had a chance to integrate into the long-term memory, yes. Even then, it's not beyond the reach of a skilled Obliviator, but I don't know what resources these Lords might have. Still... I was lucky that I went straight to my office this morning, without letting myself be stopped. And since then, I've been on my guard – or else I've been here, in my now well-protected home."

"Okay. Any other possibilities? What about the solicitor bloke, um, Lovinett? If they were willing to Oblivate you and Robards, they'd have gone after him, too..."

She nodded in glum agreement. "We spoke with Lovinett this afternoon – he couldn't remember anything about the Cartel Lords. He still recalls our interview with Swivingham, but as he tells it now, we were trying to negotiate a plea bargain, and Swivingham rejected it. Lovinett said he was showing wild mood swings." Hermione shrugged. "Edited memories, of course, intended to support a finding of suicide. Whoever these Lords are, they're thorough."

"Yeah," Harry said slowly, as an idea came to him. "Yeah, but they can't think of everything. Especially if they think those things are

only from a children's tale." He held up his hand to display the Resurrection Stone on his finger.

Hermione stared at it, as comprehension dawned. "Of... course," she breathed, "of course. I assume it works as it did in the Tale of the Three Brothers? Well, why shouldn't it, the other two do, more or less. But have you actually used the Stone this way, Harry? Can it really bring... bring back...?"

"It brings back the dead," said Harry firmly. "It doesn't bring the dead to life. There's a big difference. Beedle the Bard, and Xenophilius Lovegood, and even Dumbledore – none of them understood that, really. Well, I guess Dumbledore did, after he was dead..." He shook himself. "Never mind. The point is, we can ask this Swivingham what happened to him. If you're willing."

She didn't answer immediately, continuing to stare at the Stone, and Harry went on. "Er, and yeah, I've used the Stone to do this. Not in a long, long time, mind you."

Her eyes flicked to his. "Is it dangerous, then?"

"Not physically." Harry didn't say any more.

After a moment, Hermione nodded her understanding. "Well, then..." She drew a deep breath. "Let's do it."

It was very simple to do, really, considering the cosmic powers they were invoking. Harry turned the ring on his finger three times, and pictured the wizard in the newspaper photograph; drawing on a common memory should make it possible for both Harry and Hermione to see the spirit. In a clear voice he said, "Jack Swivingham."

And just like that, with no flash of light or other warning, Swivingham was there, seated in one of the chairs across from them, as though he'd been in the room all along. He appeared to be solid, much more solid than a ghost, but he looked... monochrome, like an old daguerreotype. The other senses' perceptions were also "off" slightly, in ways the rational mind couldn't define but was forced to accept: he might be present, but he wasn't fully "there".

"Granger," he greeted her, but with his eyes on Harry. "Looks as though the rumors were true after all."

"Be grateful for that," said Hermione. "It gives you a chance to finish what you started."

Swivingham's eyes turned to her. His smile wasn't quite as suave as it had been in life. "And what might that be, lassie?"

"Help put away the Cartel Lords. You said you had names, dates, bank accounts, all sorts of information to give, remember? Thanks to this last chance, you still can."

He snorted with laughter, but there was no real amusement in it. "That was in exchange for something, don't you remember? Quid pro quo? Things have changed a bit since then, girlie. What can you possibly offer me now in exchange for my help?"

Harry could see that Hermione was nonplussed by this. He stepped in smoothly. "From what I've read about you, friend, you haven't exactly been... comfortable... since you died." He watched as an involuntary shudder shook Swivingham's features, and smiled to himself. "Every minute you're with us here is a minute not spent there. That's got to be worth something to you. The more you cooperate..." He left the offer dangling.

Hermione immediately picked up the thread. "And on a more theological note, every good act reduces one's ultimate punishment. If you've had a taste of that, you've plenty of reason to help us. Forgiveness comes with atonement."

Swivingham closed his eyes; this time, the shudder took his entire body. When he spoke, it was with unexpected venom. "You. Pathetic. Mewling. Infants." He opened his eyes and looked at Harry and Hermione with agony and hatred competing on his face. "You have no idea what you're talking about. A few hours here, to return to an eternity of that? Infinity minus ten is still infinity, you half-blooded cretin. And you...!"

He turned on Hermione, and now the hatred had no competition. "You filthy, mudblooded bint! How dare you presume to lecture me on forgiveness? I've earned forgiveness simply by putting up with people like you! How..."

"Enough!" shouted Harry, while Hermione sat stunned. This wasn't the convivial sybarite she'd interviewed in his cell: this was another wizard altogether, afroth with anger – no, not anger, contempt, for her, for Muggleborn, for pretty much everyone.

She tried to find a way to use that emotion, to reflect it back on him, to get answers. "All right, then, don't do it for forgiveness. Do it for revenge. They murdered you in cold blood, Swivingham. This is your last chance to get back at them."

"Pfah! You mean this is my chance to help you get them! Do you think I'm as stupid as you, you scumbred waste of magic? I wouldn't help you even if..."

"I said ENOUGH!" In a bound, Harry was off the couch and over the low table, scattering papers. With one hand on Swivingham's collar, he hauled the procurer out of his chair and held him suspended, feet dangling. Harry's eyes were glowing, literally radiant with dark green energy; flickers of virid St. Elmo's fire danced around the hand at Swivingham's throat. "Tell us how you died! Now!"

Swivingham's lips curled in a sneer even as his hands clawed at the iron grip at his throat. "I – hanged – myself," he got out. "Mortal sin, innit?"

Emerald fury blazed. "Imperio!"

Swivingham froze, staring at Harry, before he started to chuckle. "Nice try," he rasped, "but that's not going to make me help you."

Slowly, the deathly green faded from around Harry's form. He lowered Swivingham to the floor, but without releasing his hold on his throat. Harry granted Swivingham a small, hard smile. "Oh, on the contrary. You just helped immensely." The smile vanished, abruptly and completely, as Harry tightened his grip again. "And I'm done with you," he growled. "Maledictus in aeternitam."

And the last view of Swivingham's face, in the instant before he faded away, showed all other emotions giving way to purest terror.

Harry's empty hand fell to his side; his shoulders slumped; his head bowed wearily. After a moment, he managed to say, "That wasn't a curse, Hermione. That was a prediction."

"I... good. I wouldn't want to think you... yes. Good."

She was staring sightlessly at the space where Swivingham had been – deeply shocked, he suddenly realized. Quickly he rounded the table and knelt by her side, taking her shoulders in his hands. "Hermione?" He was afraid he'd pushed her away, shaken her by his final words, or by the raw power he'd displayed.

It was almost a relief when she whispered, "The vitriol... my God, the hatred..." Hermione had to breathe deeply several times before she could compose herself and look Harry in the face. "He never showed any of that while he was alive. He dealt with all sorts, Purebloods, half-bloods... with never a sign that he despised people so."

"Yeah, well, they say there's nothing like being dead to strip away all your pretenses, all your false fronts. No reason for them anymore. Death is honest." He smiled grimly. "Brutally honest."

"In morte veritas, is that it?" Hermione managed to smile back. "Is that why you haven't used the Resurrection Stone in, what did you say, years?"

"Yeah." Seeing that she wouldn't be satisfied with a one-word answer, Harry settled himself beside the sofa. "The first time I ever used the Stone was the night I, erm, died. When I saw in the Pensieve that I was a Horcrux, I knew I had to die – and I intended to die, without fighting or anything, I was resigned – but going to meet Voldemort was harder than I thought it'd be. So I used the Stone to bring back my parents, and Sirius, and Remus. They..."

"Please tell me they weren't like that, Harry!"

"No! Nothing like Swivingham. More like... they were sad that I had to die, and happy I was joining them, and proud I was doing it of my own free will." Harry smiled wistfully.

"Hmph," she grumbled waspishly. "That was rather different from what your parents' spirits told you, when they appeared in your duel with Voldemort during the Triwizard Tournament."

Harry was surprised at her tone. "Maybe, but it was what I needed to hear just then."

"Because you had to be a willing sacrifice... and of course, you couldn't know that your death would be temporary. I know, Harry, Dumbledore explained it." She sniffed and muttered, "Doesn't mean I have to like it." In a more normal voice, she added, "And you haven't used the Stone since?"

He sighed. "Once. That first year, when I was wearing the Cloak continuously, to fool all the magical ways of finding me – the Ministry, the goblins, the stuff at Hogwarts, owls, elves, everyone – so that everyone would be sure I was dead. Didn't have a Muggle identity yet, so I was living in the backcountry and doing a lot of scrounging. Kind of like Sirius, which I guess was appropriate. One night, I got so lonely... I used the Stone."

"Who did you summon?"

"Ah, nobody, as such. I didn't have anyone specific in mind... so the Stone chose." He pinched the bridge of his nose and looked away from her. "I got Snape."

"Oh," she said in a low voice. "That couldn't have been fun."

Harry glanced briefly at her before he averted his eyes again; he seemed unable to continue talking while she was in his field of view, visibly responding to his words. "You know Snape gave me his memories, just before he died. I viewed them in Dumbledore's Pensieve. I never told you what I saw, did I? Well, let's just say... I understand now why he did everything he did. But I don't have to forgive him. He was Dumbledore's man, right enough, and he was... he was extraordinarily brave. But he was a petty, caustic, twisted, unforgiving son of a bitch for all that. I do not forgive him."

He looked at Hermione then. "And when the Stone brought him back that night... well, that's how I knew what to expect from Swivingham. He was not a good man, and I. Do. NOT forgive him." He glanced down at his ring. "I used to think the Stone was the best of the

Deathly Hallows... but now, I really think it's the worst. Much worse than the Wand. At first glance, it's..."

"It seems so... innocuous," Hermione concurred. "Harmless... even beneficial. And yet it's nothing of the sort, is it? I don't wonder that you haven't used it since."

"Yeah." He flashed a relieved smile at her, pleased at her quick understanding, and not at all surprised by it.

With a slight shake, Hermione brought herself back to the present. "Well, death may have made Swivingham truthful, but he was hardly cooperative. I'm afraid we're back to where we started. Unless...?" She cocked a hopeful eye at Harry. "You know something. I can tell."

"Well, yes, we did get one bit of information from him," Harry said with his tight smile. "My Imperius curse didn't work on him."

Hermione blinked. "Did you expect it to? He's dead."

For a brief moment, the dark green fire flickered again in his eyes. The Master of the Deathly Hallows spoke. "I summoned him: for me, he was physically here. I cast the Imperius on him: for me, he had a mind and will." He shook his head, as though clearing it, and it was Harry who resumed speaking. "So, yeah, it should've worked. But it didn't. And I really doubt he was strong-willed enough to throw off Imperius so easily, even when he was alive." His smile returned. "So under what circumstances would the Imperius Curse not work?"

Her brow furrowed in thought; she chewed her lower lip, and for an instant Harry flashed back to the Gryffindor common room, where the brightest witch of her generation revised her class notes. "Stipulate he has a will to be affected, and isn't strong enough to throw it off... then the Curse must be blocked somehow... by other magic... no shield was cast in this case, though, but if..." She smiled in triumph. "If he were already under the Imperius Curse...!"

He nodded and tried to speak, but her words continued to rush forth. "Of course, it's so obvious now! Once a subject is under Imperius, any attempt by another wizard to use the Curse would be expelled. The Curse must have been a carry-over from his death, just as ghosts still wear the clothes in which they died. And that means –

that means Swivingham was murdered, by someone using the Imperius Curse and ordering him to kill himself! Which eliminates any elves, because it takes a wand to cast Imperius, and only humans have wands! Oh, this is excellent!"

"Glad you approve," said Harry dryly.

"So then... if we accept that no one else could have entered the cell block without detection," Hermione stated, "that only leaves the two guards on duty that night, Nelson and Ferrers. And our Obliviators and Legilimens have cleared Ferrers, so as I said earlier, that leaves Nelson, who's looks like he's done a bunk. I have to admit that weighs against him..."

"Er, Hermione," he interjected quickly, "should you be telling me all this? Isn't this, well, sensitive information...?"

The look she gave him would have warmed a marble statue to its core. "If I can't trust you, Harry Potter, I am well and truly screwed."

"Hermione! Language!" he mock-scolded, trying to maintain an expression of shock. His laughter rather spoiled the effect. She laughed with him, and he thought for a moment that she was going to take his hands in hers, or give him one of her enthusiastic hugs. For that one moment, it almost felt as though he'd always been with her, as though he'd never left.

And then the golden moment was broken by a rush of green flame from the fireplace. Through the flames could be heard a voice: "Hermione? Hermione, are you there?" Hermione's heart fell as she recognized the voice: it was Ron.

With catlike grace, Harry was off the couch and through the door into the bedroom, where Floo callers couldn't see him. Hermione, with a helpless look after him, turned to the fireplace. "Yes, Ron, I'm here."

Ron's head appeared in the flames. "Hermione, what's going on? I tried to Apparate, I tried the Floo, but nothing seemed to get through..."

"I've had to augment the security on my home," she said shortly. Of all the possible interruptions, this was the least welcome.

"Oh, yeah, I suppose so." Ron cleared his throat nervously. "Listen, I was wondering if I could come over... I really think we need to talk..."

"If this is about your letter, Ron," she interrupted evenly, trying to keep the sharpness from her tone, "there's not a great deal for us to discuss. I've made my position plain, time and again..."

"No, not about that," he interrupted back. "I don't mean that. I, uh, need to talk about something else." He gave her a nonchalant nod that was a Floo call's equivalent of a shrug. "Nothing urgent, just wanted to know if you wanted a party for your birthday. You know, like our party after Bill's wedding..."

Hermione was about to retort that a birthday party was the last thing she needed that week, when she thought back to Bill's wedding – how the wedding party had been attacked, and how she, Ron, and Harry had been forced to fight, flee and fight again. No one besides the Trio would have known any of the specifics of that episode... and Ron had been far too casual when he'd mentioned it.

There's a serious problem, life or death – and he daren't talk about it over the Floo Network.

"I... see," she replied slowly. "Give me a minute, then, Ron." She made a hasty exit to the bedroom.

There, as she expected, she found Harry unwrapping his Stealth Cloak from inside his tunic. "I'm sorry, Hermione," he said hastily as she entered. "I should have realized, I've outstayed my welcome. If Ron's coming to see you, I'll go..."

"Whatever it is, I'm afraid it sounds important," she told him. "I'll get rid of Ron as quickly as I can. But I need you to stay here, Harry. If nothing else, there's the possibility that the Lords will try to get me again tonight – and not stop at Obliviation this time." Privately, Hermione thought there was small chance of that. Her reputation as The Witch Who Won was, in her opinion, overstated and burdensome, but at least it meant she wasn't likely to be openly assaulted.

But as she hoped, it made Harry think twice about leaving. They were, slowly and painfully, working through the problems of his abandoning her fifteen years ago – he was not about to do it again now. And she wasn't above taking advantage of that fact.

Still, he hesitated. "Okay, I'll hang around... for a bit... but I, I can't face anyone yet! Not even Ron. I'll be under the Cloak, but I'll stay in here." With the Cloak over one shoulder, he loosened the bandages on his left forearm and brought out the Elder Wand. "Hold out your hands."

Hermione did so. He traced a figure-eight around her hands with the Wand's tip. "All right – you're keyed to admit people through the wards. Maybe I should go outside and add an extra layer of protection..."

"Just stay here," she told him firmly, and went back into the living room. Ron's head waited for her in the fireplace. "Ron, walk into the fire as though you were going to Floo here – you're not going to move, though, but just wait there – and hold out your hand. I'll bring you through."

"Great. Careful, I have some, uh, baggage," Ron said. His head disappeared, but the fire stayed green. After a moment, his right hand appeared. Hermione reached into the fireplace, grasped his hand, and gave a firm tug forward as she took a step backward.

Ron came through the Floo fire into Enthalpy House, his hair disheveled and an overnight bag hanging by its strap from his left shoulder. "Thanks, Hermione," he said, no longer nonchalant but deadly serious. "I wouldn't have bothered you, but we really need your help – and you're about the only one who can help."

"We?" she asked.

He nodded and bent down to open the bag. "In here. I got the idea from one of those children's stories, you know the one? Thumbelina?"

The overnight bag opened wide, and a very worried Ginny Weasley stood up from its interior. The bag obviously had an Undetectable Extension Charm on it, like Hermione's handbag once had. Useful,

thought Hermione, if you want to avoid the appearance of being a long-term house guest.

Nervously, Ginny looked around the room, as though checking for traps. Her eye fell on the Prophet on the table, and she grimaced. "Yeah, Swivingham. I read about him. You know he didn't really commit suicide, right?" she said. At Hermione's astonished look, she nodded. "Yes. I know he was murdered. And I'm scared I may be next."

XVII: Payment Due On Past Mistakes

Under Hermione's hard scrutiny, Ginny began to fidget. She wisely said nothing further, and after a moment, Hermione said, "Sit down. I'll make some tea – and this had better be good."

Tea took only seconds, using magic, and Hermione was back in the living room with a tray of three cups before Ron and Ginny had settled onto the sofa and chair, respectively. Hermione set the tray on the table, ignoring the paperwork already there, and selected a cup for herself. She sat on the sofa, the only spot left to sit, but as far from Ron's end of the sofa as she comfortably could. "All right, let's start. Ron, do you know what this is about?"

Ron shook his head. "Gin showed up at my flat and said she had to talk to you, but absolutely not in your office. Convinced me it was a matter of life and death. Beyond that..." He shrugged helplessly.

"I see. All right, Ginny, start at the beginning." Hermione restrained her urge to interrogate Ginny... at least for the moment.

Ginny took a moment to sip her tea and collect her thoughts. "When I saw today's Prophet, I recognized the man in the photo. We've met before. I didn't know at the time his name was Jack Swivingham," she added hastily, "and I certainly didn't know what sorts of dodgy business he was involved in! He..."

"Where could you have met him, Gin?" Ron interrupted. "Don't tell me you've been slumming in Knockturn Alley! That's no place for..."

"A decent young witch like myself," finished Ginny. "Merlin, Ron, you're channeling Percy again! No, I haven't been to Knockturn Alley, thanks for the vote of confidence. No, I've seen him at..." She hesitated, and kept her gaze on Hermione as she finished, "...at Blaise Zabini's manor house."

"Zabini?" Ron's tone was a perfect blend of incredulity and disgust.

"Will you get over your old anti-Slytherin prejudices?" Ginny snapped. "Blaise is a respected politician in the Ministry – and a rising star there, practically a member of the Minister's cabinet. He's nothing to be ashamed of."

"Perhaps," said Hermione neutrally. "So how did you come to be at his home?"

"Blaise will occasionally have a few people to his manor," Ginny explained, evidently choosing her words with care, "private, informal get-togethers. I don't know if you..."

"Fire Parties?" Hermione put in dryly, and smirked at Ginny's surprised look. "Oh yes, tales of them have reached even my ears. For obvious reasons, I've never been to one." She looked at Ron and explained, "As far as I can tell, Ron, they're very exclusive parties, by invitation only... and only Purebloods seem to get invited."

"It's not a question of blood, Hermione," said Ginny defensively. "Blaise isn't like that. He'd never have reached his current position if he believed the old supremacist line – you know that as well as I do."

"I know that no modern politician can afford to spout the old supremacist line," rejoined Hermione. "But he certainly believed it when we were at Hogwarts."

"Well, then, he's changed," Ginny insisted. "Some people do, you know! Fire Parties are just... just a chance for folks who've been raised in a common culture, wizarding culture, to get together and relax. There's nothing sinister about it!"

"And yet, somehow, I feel sure that Ron, or your father, would never be invited." Hermione shook her head sharply. "Never mind. I assume you met Swivingham at one of these parties?"

"Not as a guest," hedged Ginny. "He was... that is..." She paused, obviously trying to find the right words. "If you've heard of them, you've probably guessed that a fair bit of, shall we say, social networking goes on at a Fire Party..."

"Is that how you were invited? Chaser for the Holyhead Harpies, figure in the public eye and all that?"

"Not exactly. I was seeing David Midgen at the time – back when he was starting up his new music network, the alternative to WWN, you know? He brought me to Blaise's first party, and..." Ginny stopped.

"And you've been attending them ever since? How... upwardly mobile of you," said Hermione sardonically.

"So why're they called 'Fire Parties'?" put in Ron, in an attempt to lighten the mood. "Does Zabini have a volcano in his living room, or something?"

"It's a play on Blaise's name," Hermione replied absently. "His, and his co-host's... hostess, I should say..." She broke off abruptly and stared at Ginny's fiery red hair, as the penny dropped loudly in her head. "Blaise and Flame," she finished softly, her voice a challenge.

Ginny met her gaze without flinching. She said nothing.

Hermione waited.

"Yes," Ginny finally admitted, equally softly.

"You're Flame... you've been the hostess for Blaise Zabini's 'old-boy-network' social gatherings," Hermione spelled it out. "Are you and Blaise...?"

Ginny lifted her chin defiantly. "I don't think that has any bearing on the current discussion."

"Like hell it doesn't, Ginny!" Ron erupted. "When you lie down with dogs...!" Hermione shot Ron a hard, quelling look. He subsided, crossing his arms over his chest. "Merlin, what would Mum have said?" he grumbled, just loud enough to be heard.

Hermione waited for silence before continuing. "I think I should be the judge of what does or doesn't have any bearing on our discussion," she told Ginny. "You were describing the 'networking' that goes on at these parties – is Zabini involved in that directly? As a facilitator?" Ginny hesitated again, and Hermione pressed on, very sure of her ground now. "May I assume that there's a back room or two at Zabini Manor, where deals get made and bargains get struck? Purebloods consolidating their influence and power? Call it what you like, Ginny, that's the reality of it!"

"Hermione, please understand..."

"And if Swivingham wasn't a guest, why was he there? Providing, oh, let's call it 'entertainment'?" Hermione's voice had turned scathing. "Since I doubt you'd call it by its right name...!"

Stung and ashamed, Ginny lowered her gaze to the floor. "The back rooms only," she mumbled. "I didn't know about it, Hermione, I swear. I kept seeing this bloke, but it wasn't until I read today's paper that I knew who he was, and what he'd been doing at the Manor."

There was another moment of silence. "Well," said Hermione at length, "I daresay it would embarrass Zabini if the public learned that he'd hired a Knockturn Alley crime boss to provide hookers and illegal drugs for his parties, but I don't see that as a threat on your life."

"No," agreed Ginny, "there's more," and she gulped her tea. "I, er, don't suppose you have anything stronger...?" At the looks she received from Hermione and Ron, she took another gulp, then set the cup down. Drawing a deep breath, she began, "We gave a Fire Party last Friday. There were some new guests, I'd never seen them before, and Blaise didn't introduce them to the general crowd as he usually does for newcomers. They seemed to be very important wizards, by the way Blaise was talking to them. They went straight to the back room. I followed – normally I host the main party, you see, so I stay there, and Blaise plays host to the back rooms – but this time I went back there, and I overheard Blaise talking."

"With these new, important guests?" Hermione prompted.

"Yes. Um, Swivingham wasn't there Friday, of course... he was behind bars. I heard Blaise saying something about how Swivingham was sure to be convicted now, because his elves were going to change their minds and agree to testify at his trial."

"How did he know that?" Hermione asked sharply. "This was Friday, you said? The elves had only told me on Friday – it couldn't have been more than a few hours before your party!"

"He figured the elves would testify, because of the rumor about... about Harry." Ginny fell silent, waiting.

If Ginny had been alone in Hermione's living room, Hermione might have accepted that Zabini had heard the rumor somewhere inside the Ministry. One look at Ron's red face and gaping mouth, however, and the truth flashed complete in Hermione's mind. "You told her, Ron? After I trusted you to keep it to yourself, you told Ginny about Harry?"

"Hey, it wasn't like I was taking an advert in the Prophet!" Ron shouted. "I was only telling Ginny! She's family! And anyway, I think she has a right to know if someone's pretending to be Harry, don't you!"

"Besides, he was three sheets to the wind," Ginny noted quickly. "It's not his fault, Hermione, don't blame him."

Hermione turned her fury on Ginny. "And then you turned right around and told Zabini...!"

"He didn't believe it, though," Ginny said. "He didn't believe there was an imposter... he, er, thought it was a ruse by you to trick the elves into testifying. He was actually pretty impressed."

"Am I supposed to be flattered? I asked that it be kept secret!" Hermione had no way of knowing whether Harry was listening, but she hoped he was, and that he understood what had happened. She wondered in passing whether he'd be angry enough to confront Ginny – and so confirm his existence.

In the meantime, she needed to bring the conversation back on track. "So Zabini was telling these guests that Swivingham was going to Azkaban?"

Ginny nodded. "And that... that he'd probably betray them."

Hermione jumped on this. "He used those words?" It seemed incredible – but if the Cartel Lords were responsible for Swivingham's murder, and Blaise Zabini had a hand in it...! The implications were staggering. She kept them to herself, however: she still had nothing concrete.

Ginny licked her lips nervously. "I, I think he said, 'He'll probably betray us now to save his skin.' And then it was, 'Don't worry, I'll take care of it. He'll set a good example.' Or close to that." Ginny twisted

her fingers together. "And then I saw today's Prophet, and read all about Swivingham, and I knew he didn't kill himself – Blaise had him killed. I, I didn't want to believe it, but...!"

Ron spoke up. "Does Zabini know you overheard him?"

"I don't know. They nearly caught me – I had to knock and go into the room with them, and pretend I had a question for Blaise. You know, so I wouldn't look like I was eavesdropping. But if Blaise suspects anything...!"

"He might not have you killed," said Hermione calmly. "He might simply have you Obliviated." She didn't explain that this seemed to be the Cartel Lords' preferred method of dealing with problems: there were obviously advantages to keeping their existence unknown. Swivingham had evidently been a special case: either they couldn't find a skilled enough Obliviator who had access to his cell, or, as Ginny's tale suggested, they were making an example of him.

Hermione's words didn't seem to reassure Ginny. She drained the dregs of her cup and set it back on the tray with a clatter. "Hermione, what can we do?"

"We can keep calm." Hermione fell silent, considering. There was, she judged, a real risk to Ginny's life: Even if Ginny knew no more than she'd just told, the fact that she was Hermione's sister-in law might lead Zabini to assume the worst. Moreover, Hermione was quite sure that Ginny did know more than she was telling, even if she didn't realize it. If she'd been present at most of these Fire Parties, she might well have seen chance encounters, heard bits of conversation, which when added together might be damaging to Zabini. And such scattered memories would be nearly impossible to Obliviate without detection... while killing was so easy.

"Tonight, you'll spend the night here," she finally said, hoping Harry was listening. "As I told Ron, my house defenses have been augmented recently... you'll be safe here. Tomorrow, I'll bring in one of the Department's evidentiary Pensieves. I'd like to see for myself the conversation between Zabini and his guests... to determine how dangerous it would be for him, and thus for you."

"And if Hermione doesn't think it's dangerous," said Ron, "then you should probably go to Quidditch practice this week, as usual. If Zabini isn't suspicious, you don't want to make him suspicious, right? Act normally – but you might want to beg off the next Fire Party, say you're sick or something. The less direct contact with him, the better."

"Yes, Ron, I'm sure you'd love that," said Ginny, with her usual tartness when dealing with her brother. She became somber again as she said to Hermione, "And... and if you look at my memory, and you decide it is dangerous?"

"Magical Law Enforcement has some safe houses tucked away, here and there," Hermione assured her. "There'll be no trouble putting you up in one..."

"No! If it's through the Ministry, then Blaise can know! He can find me!" Ginny insisted. "He has...." She stopped.

"Spies everywhere?" guessed Hermione, then in a voice of comprehension, "Or should I say sympathizers? Ah, I see. No wonder you showed up inside an overnight bag. No telling who might be watching the Floo." She took a sip from her cup of tea – and nearly spewed it out in surprise, as she felt something press against her ear. The bud of Harry's Extendable Ear.

"Don't trust her too far," came Harry's voice. "She's not the threat to the Cartel Lords – you are. And if Zabini's working for them, and she's working for Zabini... she may have been sent here. By them. To get at you, when they couldn't."

It was a thought worthy of Mad-Eye Moody at his most paranoid. Hermione knew that Ginny could be mean-spirited and spiteful on occasion, but she'd always believed Ginny to be a basically decent person. Hermione had a hard time believing Ginny could be evil, or that she'd invent a story just to have the chance to strike at Hermione.

But then, she'd not have believed that Ginny would ever associate with Blaise Zabini, with his Pureblood beliefs – which Hermione felt sure he maintained, even if he kept them to himself for political reasons.

Constant vigilance.

"You can sleep in Rose's room, Ginny," she said at last. "I'll put additional wards in place, just to be sure." She heard Harry murmur, "I'm on it," as the bud withdrew from her ear, and knew he'd understood: additional wards on the room itself, in case it was Ginny who proved to be the danger.

"Zabini might not have any plans for your head," she concluded, "but we'll take no chances. Once I've reviewed the Pensieve, we'll know what to do next."

"Thank you, Hermione," said Ginny in relief, and she seemed genuinely grateful. "I'll try not to be a bother." She stood, slung the overnight bag over her shoulder, and headed for the door to Rose's bedroom.

"Yeah, thanks, Hermione," said Ron; but while he likewise seemed grateful, he made no move to rise. Instead, he leaned forward towards Hermione and lowered his voice. "Y'know, it might be best if I spent the night, too. Like you said, just to be sure. An extra person around can't hurt security, don't you agree?"

She just barely kept from rolling her eyes at his transparency. "Of course, Ron, if you think so," she told him sweetly. "You can sleep on the sofa."

He twisted his mouth in annoyance. "Not exactly what I had in mind."

"I know exactly what you had in mind, Ronald Weasley, and my answer's the same now as it was before," she said, her voice low but firm. "What part of No don't you comprehend?"

"The part that keeps a husband and wife out of their marriage bed!" he answered hotly, no longer bothering to keep his voice down. "God damn it, Hermione, this is beyond ridiculous! I know we've had our disagreements, but..."

"Disagreements? Ron, we fought tooth and nail! We were never compatible! It was a mistake for us to marry, and I can't have you around anymore! When I told you we were through, I meant it!"

"Well, maybe you should've thought of that before you insisted on using your parents' stupid wedding ceremony! Because you can say we're through all you like, but we're still stuck with each other! You can't have anyone else, and neither can I! What good are your brains if you can't figure out a way to fix this!"

"Why, of course, Ron! Since it's our own magic that enforces our vows, all we have to do to 'fix this', as you put it, is become Squibs! No magic, no problem! Is that what you want?" They were both on their feet now, facing off in high-pitched confrontation.

"No, dammit, but we aren't Muggles either! If we'd done a regular wizarding ceremony, we wouldn't be in this mess!"

"Right! Because I've noticed how much importance wizards attach to little things like fidelity! Small wonder Swivingham could find customers! I'm sure you're sorry you couldn't be one!" Hermione screamed.

"Oh, I doubt he felt any need," came Ginny's voice from the bedroom door, a silken voice, gleeful at the barbs it was about to deliver. "I mean, the new clerk at the Wheezes is more than willing to accommodate him. What's her name again, Ron – Felicia? Or is that pronounced Fellatia?"

Both Hermione and Ron stared at her aghast, speechless with rage and mortification. As usual, it was Hermione who found her voice first. "For someone whose life expectancy depends on my good will," she said in a dangerously quiet voice, "you don't know when to keep your mouth shut."

Smoothly, Ginny began to respond.

"Shut," emphasized Hermione. Ginny lost her smile and closed her mouth.

Hermione waited a moment, until she was certain her point had been made, then turned to Ron. "True or false?" she asked, in the same laser-quiet voice.

Ron's face was brilliant scarlet by now, but he responded as he characteristically did, with a frontal assault. "First of all, what the hell business is it of yours? You've made it clear you're never gonna do

me again, so what do you care if someone else does? And second of all, since we can't cheat on each other, whatever I did with Felicia wasn't cheating, was it? We weren't having sex! So get off my back!"

She stood, frozen and silent, staring at this stranger in her living room, wondering what had happened to the man she'd thought she'd known well enough to marry. When Hermione spoke again, she was pleased that there was no tremor in her voice, and no hint of moisture in her eye.

"Very well, Ron. I'll get off your back." She stepped close to him and jabbed a finger in his face. "And you get out of my house. Now." She took a step back and added, with stony finality, "And forever."

Ron looked like he wanted to continue arguing, but in a rare display of prudence, remained quiet. He shot Ginny a venomous look that promised dire retribution, and Disapparated.

Hermione turned on Ginny. "Good night," she said in curt dismissal, and headed for her own bedroom. She found herself hoping that Harry put really solid wards on Ginny's room, sufficient to block anything from entering, like oxygen.

"Hermione, wait," said Ginny miserably. "I'm... I'm sorry. After all you're doing for me, that was way out of line. I had no business..."

"You've never lost an opportunity to humiliate Ron," Hermione interrupted. "Ever since we were in Hogwarts. I'm not the only one who rates an apology." She tried to leave the matter there, but indignation spilled forth. "And you're damn right, you had no business! Yes, Ron and I made our mistake when we were younger – I admit it, and we're paying for it. No one's sorrier than I am. But I don't really think you're in any position to rub our noses in it, Ginny!"

"No, I'm not. And I'm truly sorry."

Hermione's indignant anger couldn't be contained. It didn't occur to her, until later, that she was sounding forth to the person who had sparked the confrontation in the first place. "And how can he say that... that... isn't sex? How can he honestly maintain...!"

"I'm guessing," Ginny offered, "that if the magic of your vows let him do it, then it was all right under those vows."

"The intent was sexual gratification with another woman, Ginny. And magic is powered by intent, as much as by the specific words. It certainly violates the spirit of our vows."

"But if Ron's intent was to be bound only by the specific words?"

"Then... then that would mean... from the very beginning... he'd never considered our marriage to be..." Hermione broke off, then gave a short bark of bitter laughter. "Our marriage. Right. We don't have a marriage, do we? We have magically enforced wedding vows. Not a marriage."

"I'm sorry, Hermione," Ginny said again. But this time, the words carried entirely different weight.

"As am I, Ginny. As am I." Wearily, Hermione nodded goodnight and turned to her bedroom.

Ginny's voice followed her, a temptress. "Hermione, if there's no marriage to save... and if Ron's found a way to find some pleasure despite your bindings... why shouldn't you do the same? Is it so unthinkable?"

Hermione squeezed her eyes shut. "Yes, Ginny, yes it is. It is un..."

Harry, smiling as he prepared breakfast for her.

Harry, sitting all night by her bedside, for no other reason than to hold hands.

Harry, staring at her in cami and knickers, unable to take his eyes off her, bringing blushing warmth wherever his eyes touched her.

Harry, who wouldn't come back for the wizarding world, but who came back for her.

Harry, noble, stubborn, self-sacrificing, infuriating, irreplaceable, and decidedly more fanciable than ever.

"...thinkable," she sighed, and closed the door behind her.

XVIII: Behavior Modification

Maybe it's a good thing the Cloak started deadening my emotions again, Harry fumed silently. Otherwise I might've hexed Ron right there in Hermione's living room.

As it is, I'm still boiling.

After Ron had been sent packing, Harry had remained at Enthalpy House just long enough to see Ginny settled in Rose's bedroom, and to add an alarm spell to the extra wards on that room – to alert him should she leave the room in any manner, for any reason. Then, gritting his teeth, he'd Apparated to Diagon Alley for the first time in fifteen years.

Most of the shops had closed at dusk, but there were still witches and wizards mingling down the Alley. Harry had pressed himself against a wall, his fear of being discovered reaching almost claustrophobic levels. But he'd kept calm, looking up and down the Alley until he spotted Weasleys' Wizard Wheezes. Ron lived in a flat above the shop, he knew.

He now watched the windows of the flat, as the evening wore on. One by one, the few remaining open shops closed their shutters... only the Leaky Cauldron stayed open late. The crowd of pedestrians thinned, until the Alley was deserted. Harry remained still, maintaining his vigil, until he saw the lights in the flat's window go out.

At Hogwarts, and at the Burrow, Ron had always been able to fall right to sleep. Harry gave it another half-hour, just to be safe. Then he walked down to the shop, drew the Elder Wand from the straps on his left forearm, and began to probe. It was much the same as Dumbledore had done, when he and Harry had tried to retrieve the locket Horcrux from the cave grotto: no flashy spellwork or incantations, but quiet probing of the defenses.

The Wheezes' defenses felt like a standard anti-Apparation hex, combined with an alarm spell and a couple of others that he'd never seen... probably unique, with nasty effects, given the proprietors.

In short, nothing capable of keeping out Harry. The barrier to the Death Chamber was the first I've found that I couldn't get through,

he thought. Any other barrier... well, if they wouldn't stop Death, they won't stop me. And compared to the wards on Hermione's place, or the Ministry, these are simple.

He Apparated silently into the flat, not even a pop of air announcing his arrival. He'd had to guess at the flat's layout, and by good fortune he'd guessed right: he arrived in Ron's bedroom. Ron lay on his bed, snoring as loudly as Harry remembered.

Harry was tempted, oh so tempted, to awaken Ron with some nasty hexes of his own. But it would mean revealing himself to Ron, followed by the inevitable explanations. Harry'd been unwilling to do that, even before the evening's earlier revelations; now, he simply didn't know if Ron could be trusted with the secret.

Instead, Harry decided a little psychological conditioning was in order.

He placed a glamour on his own features, to soften them slightly and make him appear younger, closer to Ron's last memory of him. More glamours were cast around Ron's head, not on it but around it, to distort his perceptions into a surreal effect – emphasizing negative emotions below Ron's threshold of perception, like a milder form of a dementor's gloom. Finally, a low-powered Confundus charm insured that Ron would be uncritically receptive, unable to analyze what he would see and hear.

With that, Harry slipped the Elder Wand back into his sleeve and stepped out of the Stealth Cloak. Deliberately, he lowered his voice half an octave and assumed a stern expression – not hard to do, he noted. "Ron!" he intoned, laying his hand on Ron's shoulder.

Ron snorted and half-opened his eyes. "Wha...?" he said groggily, then realized a stranger was in his bedroom. He opened his eyes fully as he batted at the hand on his shoulder – and froze, the action uncompleted, as he recognized Harry's form in the darkness. "Harry?"

"Yes," said Harry, still in that sepulchral tone. He said no more.

"But – but you're dead! No, this is a trick, you're the imposter who's been messing with Teddy Lupin! You can't be Harry Potter, he's dead!"

"Yes."

Ron's face paled. "Yes?" he echoed feebly.

Harry didn't respond, letting the Confundus and the distorting glamours do their work. He saw with satisfaction how Ron's eyes were sliding wildly from side to side, the whites showing around the edges.

"Harry... listen, Harry, mate, what is this? Are you a ghost? H-Harry, say something. What's..."

Harry decided Ron had worked himself into enough of a lather. "I left Hermione in your care."

"You left...? B-But Harry, it's not my fault! Well, not all my fault! You gotta understand, Hermione's got even more mental since you died. She's more of a swot than ever..."

"I trusted you," Harry broke in, "and you hurt her." He let the words roll off his tongue, like a Shakespearean actor playing Hamlet's father. "I am," and he paused for effect, "disappointed in you."

Ron was trembling now, breathing heavily and sweating hard. Good, thought Harry, and he leaned closer. "Stay away from her. Never hurt her again. Or you – will – pay." Without gesturing, he used the Elder Wand to cast the Somnus Spell on his quondam best friend. Ron's panicked eyes rolled back into his head, and he went limp on the bed.

Satisfied, Harry dispelled the glamours and retrieved the Cloak. When he wakes up, he thought as he draped the Cloak over his shoulders and let it mould to his body, he'll remember this only as a nightmare... but maybe he'll stop being such an arse with Hermione. God knows she deserves better.

He Apparated back to Enthalpy House, arriving in the living room. The house was dark; Ginny and Hermione were in bed asleep, then. A quick check of the wards confirmed Ginny hadn't left her bedroom. Still... Frowning, he extended his perceptions to include the outer wards on the cottage. They felt as though some magic had been used against them: nothing strong or prolonged, more like a quick

test. Whoever'd done it had left immediately thereafter, too soon to register a magical signature.

Which happened the same night Ginny arrived. Coincidence? If it isn't, this secret Cartel isn't nearly as subtle as I'd expect from Hermione's description of it, but still...

Harry sighed and glanced over at the sofa; he was a little surprised to see Hermione's legal paperwork still scattered over the floor and coffee table. He gathered them together with a wave of his hand. Once the sofa was cleared, he made ready to bed down for the night, still wrapped in the Cloak.

No, he berated himself, I need to get out of this Cloak. Hermione's right, if I wear it too long it'll damage me. But he wasn't about to leave Hermione to deal with Ginny alone, should the need arise – Harry still wasn't entirely convinced that Ginny wasn't a threat, either directly or as a spy. There was no help for it: he'd have to spend the night in Hermione's bedroom. He hoped she wouldn't mind.

He slipped quietly inside and closed the door before removing the Cloak again. Hermione was in bed, seemingly asleep, but her troubled expression showed she hadn't been happy when she'd retired. Another mark against Ginny, in Harry's book.

The pillows and coverlet he'd used the previous night were neatly stacked in the corner of the room. Harry sat down in that corner, where he could keep an eye on both the door and Hermione, tucked one of the pillows behind his head, closed his eyes, and waited for sleep to come.

The sky outside the window was slate grey, but growing lighter by the second; reddish highlights were beginning to blossom as Harry watched. It had been another sleepless night for Harry, still sitting in his corner, and he didn't feel the least bit fatigued.

And now he was beginning to be seriously concerned.

When was the last time I slept – a full night's sleep, not a catnap? Has it been anytime in the last couple of weeks, since the debacle at the Idée Fixe? If I did, I don't remember it.

I mean, I've done without sleep a few times, when I was out helping people. That little girl in her nursery, a few years ago... things like that. But this is different, this is... like I've lost the need to sleep.

It must be the Hallows, somehow. They're a tremendous source of power, after all – maybe they're energizing me, keeping my body from needing sleep. But why? And why start now?

Harry knew he should ask Hermione about this, and he would... just as soon as they'd dealt with the Cartel Lords, and Zabini, and all. One crisis at a time, he thought wryly.

He heard Hermione stirring in her bed, slowly returning to consciousness. She moaned slightly and began to breathe more rapidly... the remnants of some morning dream, Harry guessed. He was wondering whether to wake her, when her head began to roll slightly on her pillow – her eyes opened, blinked to shake away the cobwebs, and spotted him in the corner. "Harr...?" she began.

Quickly, Harry held up a hand in a plea for silence. His left hand gestured at the closed bedroom door. "Muffliato, Imperturbus," he cast in rapid succession. "All right, it's safe to talk – she won't hear a thing. G'morning, Hermione."

Hermione blinked twice more, yawned and came immediately awake – she'd always had that enviable ability. A sort of mental discipline that came with being a genius, Harry suspected. "Mmm. Good morning, Harry. Did you spend the night in that corner? That can't have been very comfortable..."

He dismissed it with a shrug. "Didn't want to sleep in the Cloak... and being visible on the sofa didn't exactly seem a good idea, either. Besides, this way I could keep an eye out... just in case."

"Um." She sat up in her bed... Harry noted in passing that she'd slept in long-sleeved, opaque pyjamas – which shouldn't have caused the pang of disappointment he felt. "You don't honestly believe that Ginny's been planted here... that her story last night was all a fabrication...!"

"Yeah, well, constant vigilance and all that." He showed her the stack of legal paperwork he'd collected. "The less she sees, the better – even if she isn't a plant. Both she and Ron seem a little too

easy with other people's secrets." He looked stonily at the door. "I don't think I'm ready to trust her with mine."

"Oh." Hermione turned slightly pink. After a moment she said softly, "Thank you, then."

He laughed, and threw back at her the words she'd said the night before. "If I can't trust you, Hermione Granger, I am well and truly screwed."

"Harry! Language!" she laughed with him. For a moment, it seemed that whatever cares she'd borne from the night before were gone.

But she turned serious again soon enough. "Well, I've still got to deal with the mess left by Swivingham's death. Are you visiting your dairy farmers again today?"

He nodded. "Just a day or two more... they should be able to cope with their problems by then."

"Of course. And will you... be staying here again tonight? I know you don't want Ginny to know..."

"Hermione, I want to stay as long as there's any chance that... well, you know... that you won't be all right. If that's all right." Harry gave a wry half-smile. "I like to think I can learn from my mistakes."

"I appreciate that."

"But, um..." Harry hesitated, wondering how best to say this next bit, wondering how she might take it. "As soon as the, uh, 'Swivingham mess' is done, I should be leaving again. For Greece," he added hastily, before she could take his words the wrong way. "I want to look around Greece... see if I can find that cave you mentioned, the one that leads to the underworld. If it's like the Arch, if it's another portal to the afterlife, I should be able to chuck the Hallows there."

She gave him a penetrating look. "You've changed your mind, then? I thought you'd still planned to hold onto the Hallows until you died undefeated."

"Yeah, well, that's still my fallback plan, but I'd rather not wait that long. In case I didn't mention it before, these things are dangerous."

Harry kept to himself his worries about his lack of sleep. "The sooner the world is shut of them, the better."

"I couldn't agree more." Hermione was still giving him that look, as though she knew what he was thinking, even without his saying it... that she understood the danger the Hallows presented to him. After a moment, she continued, "And you know, the country's history is rich with magic – there are any number of magical sites in Greece to visit. Or so I've heard. I've never been there."

"Me either. Okay, then," agreed Harry absently. Hermione smiled slightly, and he suddenly wondered if he'd just committed himself to something without realizing it.

And was surprised, after a moment, when he found he didn't mind being committed, really. Not at all.

"Right," he said, standing and stretching, "So I should be off, I reckon. Back to my flat – Jacob Clayman's flat, I mean – shower and change. Let you shower and, um, change. Think you can handle breakfast on your own?"

"Oh, I think I still remember how," Hermione replied, smiling wider. She swung her legs out of bed, took two quick steps, and had him in a hug before he could react. "Thank you, Harry. Thank you for everything."

"You too," Harry mumbled into her hair as he returned her hug. It was not until much later that he wondered if Thank you might have some other meaning.

Hermione's thoughts were uncharacteristically disordered as she Apparated into the Ministry of Magic that morning. Indeed, it would be fair to describe her thoughts as chaotic. To go to bed after hearing the awful revelations from Ron and Ginny – to transition from a disturbing dream (the details of which remained maddeningly nebulous, except for glimpses of green eyes and black hair) to waking with Harry sitting at eye level – and now to racking her brains into some approximation of cognitive function upon arrival at her office. There was too much to be done today for her to be distracted, by anything or anyone.

Evidently, the Ministry had decided to be more than usually chaotic that day, too. Hermione walked into her office to find Croaker waiting for her. He didn't wait for a greeting, but pressed an envelope into her hand, murmuring "The runes have changed." He started to leave, but Hermione caught his arm.

"Changed how?"

"What had been a statement now seems to be a warning," Croaker said shortly. He looked deliberately at the envelope in Hermione's hand, as though all further explanation were inside it, and left without another word.

Next came the memos regarding the Conference on International Crime. True to the Minister's request, it was being convened "within the week" – indeed, on Thursday. And, as she ought to have expected, it would be chaired not by Magical Law Enforcement, but by the Department of International Cooperation. I have got to prove that Zabini's involved with the Cartel Lords before then, she vowed. If he's allowed to run that Conference, it might as well not bother to convene.

She penned a request to have one of the Department's evidentiary Pensieves brought to her office... paused as an idea struck her, gave a small secret smile, and added a line to the request before folding it and launching it into the interoffice slipstream. I can only hope Ginny's memories can show us something useful – damaging to Zabini. Of course, in that case, she's definitely in danger. Which means I'll have a semi-permanent house guest. Oh joy.

Finally, she received a visit from Grimaldi and Bones, the Enforcers tasked with finding Eddie Nelson. They'd found Nelson at the home of a friend... nursing a hangover that even Sobriety Potions couldn't fully cure. "One of his pals is getting married next week," Bones explained, "and it looks like the stag party turned into a drinking contest. Eddie smelled like he'd been embalmed in Ogden's Finest."

"Which he practically was," added Grimaldi.

"Hmph," sniffed Hermione. "Well, as soon as he's regained some semblance of coherence, take him down to Peasegood to see if his memories match his story. Keep me posted – and good work, both of you."

And all that was before morning break.

Once Grimaldi and Bones left, she leaned back in her chair and rubbed her eyes wearily. It looked now as though Nelson wasn't Swivingham's killer after all... but in that case, she had no suspects. And Robards would certainly renew his suspicion of the elves, either directly or as accomplices. Although Hermione knew the killer had used the Imperius Curse on Swivingham, she couldn't tell Robards how she knew – without bringing Harry into the mess.

But it had to be one of the guards, she told herself. No one else had a wand! Unless... unless someone else sneaked into the cell block, and Obliviated the guard to forget they'd been there. Since Ferrers showed no sign of Obliviation, that means it was on Nelson's watch. We'll see what Peasegood finds.

A tentative knock sounded on her door. "Um, ma'am?" asked Dennis Creevey carefully.

She didn't take her hands from her eyes, hoping he'd get the hint. "Yes?"

He drew breath, as though gathering all his courage, and said, "I think I have a lead on the Swivingham death."

Hermione immediately sat upright and pinned him with her gaze. "Let's hear it."

Dennis came into her office and shut the door behind him. "It was something Mr. Robards said to you, the day we found Swivingham's body," he began, placing a stack of file folders on the desk. "I don't think anyone else heard but me. Something about it happening before?"

"Yes, an accused Death Eater, at the end of the First Voldemort War," nodded Hermione. "Sliced his wrists with a chicken bone, of all things." She frowned. "That does sound like an Imperius-induced suicide, now I think about it..."

"Well, I went back through the old records," said Dennis, his confidence growing with Hermione's interest. He opened the first folder. "Obadiah Castle, Dark Mark on his forearm, charged with

eleven counts of murder and torture. But the records show," and he flipped through the pages, "that Barty Crouch had offered him the same sort of deal as Karkaroff. A reduced sentence in exchange for naming unindicted Death Eaters."

"In-teresting." Hermione snatched up the folder and scanned its contents eagerly. Dennis waited a moment for her to look up from the pages.

"By an odd coincidence, two days after Castle's death, another suspected Death Eater's case was thrown out for lack of evidence. The man claimed total exoneration, of course." Dennis slid the second file over the desk. Hermione's eyes widened at the name on the outside of the folder.

"And by a yet odder coincidence," concluded Dennis triumphantly, "they had the same defense attorney." He flipped open the second folder and laid his finger next to a name. Hermione slowly began to match Dennis's smile.

Her smile abruptly vanished. "But as you just said, this could be coincidence. It's suggestive, but it's not proof. And he'll be sure to point that out."

Dennis nodded. "So what do we do next? Would this be enough to bring him in for questioning, at least?"

"Yes, but to no purpose. He would deny complicity, we'd have no tangible evidence, and he'd walk away. And if he were the guilty party, we'd have accomplished nothing but to warn him that we suspect him."

"Veritaserum..."

She shook her head and tapped the folders with one finger. "Not without more solid evidence than this."

"Then what...?"

Hermione lowered her gaze and chewed her lip in deep thought. After a moment, she looked up at Dennis. "Well, first I talk to Robards," she said slowly, "and see if he'll give me carte blanche without explaining why. And then, Dennis, you and I take a little trip."

She smiled warmly at Dennis's confusion. "It's only fair you should come, Dennis. This is excellent work."

The guard shut the door to the visitor's room at Azkaban, leaving Draco Malfoy looking around in puzzlement. If he'd been brought here for one of Weasley's gloat sessions, Weasley ought already to be present. Instead, Draco was alone in the visitor's room.

He was not to remain alone for long. The door opened again, and Narcissa Malfoy was escorted in. "What is going on?" she demanded of her guard. "I insist that you tell me!" The guard said nothing, merely releasing her arm and leaving, closing the door behind her.

Draco was incredulous. "Mother?" He took a faltering step towards her, then rushed to embrace her. "It's been so long...!"

The door opened a third time, and Lucius Malfoy was shoved inside. The years in Azkaban had treated him less kindly than the other Malfoys: as a convicted Death Eater, his cell had fewer human guards, and more dementor guards. His hair was unwashed and matted, his complexion sickly, his eyes sunken and haunted.

Lucius spun back to the door as it slammed shut. He was about to scream at the departing guard when he realized he wasn't alone in the room. He turned, saw his wife and son – and the embrace quickly became a three-way hug.

"My husband... what is this about?" Narcissa ventured at length to ask.

Lucius shook his head warningly. He rolled his eyes to indicate that they were undoubtedly being watched.

The opposite door opened to admit Hermione and Dennis. "Good afternoon, everyone," she said pleasantly. "Let me set your minds at ease from the start. I've dismissed the observers, and taken a few other precautions... I wanted to guarantee us perfect privacy."

The entire Malfoy family glared with undisguised hatred at the Muggleborn witch who had ruined their lives. "What the hell are you doing here?" spat Draco. "Couldn't the Weasel fit us into his

schedule today? Or are you proving to him how much better you can be at gloating...?"

Narcissa placed her hand on her son's shoulder, silencing him. "What do you want?" she asked Hermione in more moderate tones.

Hermione gestured to the Malfoys to sit down, as she and Dennis took their own seats on their side of the room. "Not much," she told them, opening her briefcase. "A little information. A modicum of cooperation."

Lucius coughed hoarsely. "Indeed," he said, in an attempt at his old patrician drawl. The effect was spoiled by the roughness of his voice, which had seen so little use. "And why should we aid a sworn enemy? You can hardly expect us to help you out of the goodness of our hearts, after all you've done to us."

"Oh, no, the goodness of your hearts is far too small to be of any use," Hermione agreed. She pursed her lips in thought. "I could easily have got a Ministry order, doped you with Veritaserum up to your eyeballs, taken what I wanted – and returned you to your cell." Her cool look implied that the option was still open.

"But I thought it better to offer you an incentive – cooperation is so much more pleasant," she continued with more sympathy. "Which does raise a dilemma." Hermione leaned forward slightly. "Mr. Malfoy, as a convicted Death Eater – and ranking high among Voldemort's followers – you were sentenced to life without parole. Very little I can do about that, I'm afraid. But it seems you have information I want."

She glanced at Narcissa and Draco. "Mrs. Malfoy and Draco were never given the Dark Mark, never convicted of being Death Eaters. So they weren't given life sentences – and do have the possibility of parole. But sadly, I feel sure they were never party to this particular information."

Hermione looked back at Lucius, and couldn't suppress the superior smile of a person who knows she has the upper hand. "That's why I asked that all of you be brought to this discussion today. We can consider any information as coming from you as a group... and any reduction in punishment applying to you as a group."

Lucius stared stonily at Hermione, but said nothing. Narcissa and Draco looked hesitantly from the Malfoy patriarch to the slender witch who held their fates in her hand.

Dennis broke the silence. "Maybe we were wrong, Madam Granger. Maybe there are other Malfoy heirs to carry on the family name. I thought for sure old Draco was the last of his line."

Draco drew a hissing inward breath. "Creevey, you brown-nosing little..." His mother tightened her hand on his forearm, and he bit off what would have been a scathing retort.

"Course, he's not begetting any heirs in here," Dennis added to himself, almost as an afterthought.

"Point... made," grated Lucius at last. "In return for freedom for my wife and son, then, along with the restoration of the Malfoy estates and assets..."

"Oh, those have long since been confiscated by the Ministry," said Hermione with a show of regret, "to help pay for the damages caused by Voldemort's regime. You might still have some savings in your Gringotts vault, which could perhaps be restored to you." She extracted a file folder from her briefcase and set it to rest on her lap. "In return for cooperation now... which may include court testimony under Veritaserum later."

Lucius Malfoy bowed his head in assent. "What do you wish to know?"

"The First Voldemort War... the one that pretty much ended when he was defeated by a one-year-old baby," began Hermione, watching the snarl pass over Malfoy's face, "you were accused of being a Death Eater even then."

"And was completely exonerated by the Ministry," put in Lucius sharply.

"And had your case dropped by the Ministry," corrected Hermione. "Come now, it was thirty years ago, you can tell me how you managed it." She nodded encouragingly.

Something like a smirk appeared. "By calling in favours, in some cases," he said easily. "With social status and influence, one can amass a fair few. In other cases, judicious amounts of money, to the right government officials."

"That surely wouldn't have been enough to clear you... if they thought they had enough evidence to accuse you in the first place."

Lucius's smirk vanished. His brow furrowed as he stared at Hermione, trying to glean from her body language what she wanted, what she already knew, whether she was bluffing. Hermione returned his gaze unwaveringly, revealing nothing.

"You must be thinking of Obadiah Castle," he grudged after a minute. "Yes, Castle claimed he could finger me as a Death Eater, but he must have known he couldn't support such an accusation. I suppose that's why he killed himself. His faith in Our Lord and His Cause was... lacking."

"How was it arranged, Mr. Malfoy?" Hermione asked. Her voice was soft velvet – with Damascus steel just underneath.

"Ah," said Malfoy, now knowing what the interview was about. Visibly, he debated whether he should continue to cooperate, or try to bargain again.

Narcissa moved slightly. "Lucius," she whispered, and he turned to look at her... and they communicated without speaking for a long minute, as by her facial expressions Narcissa pleaded for the fate of their bloodline.

At last, with a sigh, Malfoy turned back to Hermione. "Castle and I employed the same attorney. The man came to me the night before Castle died... told me that Crouch was offering Castle a deal, which would likely get me Kissed. And I was told that, for a sufficient... consideration..." He shrugged. "My attorney could make Castle, and the problem, go away. He didn't say how, and I thought it prudent not to ask. But it was done."

"You paid your attorney to kill his other client, in order to have your case dismissed. Is that right, Mr. Malfoy?" persisted Hermione.

Malfoy swallowed and said, committing himself to his path, "That is exactly right, Madam... Granger."

"And the attorney's name?

He made one final attempt to prevaricate. "Surely it's there in your records..."

"That's not how this works," Hermione reproved him. "Upon your own testimony, tell me his name."

Malfoy nodded with an air of resignation – an acknowledgement that the Muggleborn witch had won. "Edwin Lovinett."

XIX: Gathering Intelligence

"What I can't figure out," Hermione said to herself as she and Dennis made their way to Azkaban's Apparation Point, "is how Lovinett could have done it. I saw him give up his wand to the guard – not that anyone could smuggle a wand past the guard desk's sensors, anyway..."

Dennis shrugged. "We'll ask him after we've hauled him in. I mean, now we have enough solid proof to use Veritaserum, right?"

"Right – but we don't haul him in yet." At Dennis's astonished look, Hermione explained, "I went to extraordinary lengths to keep our visit to Azkaban today a secret. I don't want to show our hand until we're ready."

"But I don't see..."

"Why did Lovinett kill Swivingham?" asked Hermione gently. "Who is he working for?"

"I don't know..." Dennis began, then caught himself. "But you think they're the ones who had Robards Obliviated?"

"It would seem so, yes."

"Lovinett did that, too?"

"Probably not. If Lovinett were skilled with Memory Charms, why not Obliviate Swivingham, instead of killing him?" Hermione recalled Ginny's story, with Zabini calling Swivingham an 'example' – but until she had a chance to review Ginny's Pensieved memories, those suspicions were best kept to herself.

For a moment, she slipped back into lecturer mode. "Right now, nobody knows that Swivingham's death was anything but suicide – nobody but us, and the ones responsible. If we arrest Lovinett now, the guilty ones will know we know – and we're not in a position yet to arrest them as well. But they mustn't be given a chance to respond, either – flee, hide, or counter – so for now, we hold off on Lovinett." Hermione gave a grim half-smile at her colleague's impatience. "Only for now, Dennis. As soon as we can collect Lovinett in a way that doesn't tip off his employers, we will."

"Whatever you say," said Dennis, still impatient but willing to trust The Witch Who Won. "Do you have a plan, then?"

"I've an idea, yes. It will require a good deal of coordination and advance preparation." Hermione sighed and couldn't help wincing. "Not least of which will be the humble pie."

Ginny watched Blaise's retreating figure in puzzlement. Whatever reaction she'd expected from him, upon hearing Ron's news of an imposter Harry, it hadn't been that look of sharp attention... followed by quick excuses and rapid departure. He was returning to the drawing room, where his three mysterious guests were being privately entertained, and Ginny couldn't imagine why they'd be interested in this bit of gossip.

Especially as Blaise had insisted it wasn't true, but merely a ploy on Hermione's part.

She hesitated, turned the hesitation into a wait, and gave Blaise enough time to return to the drawing room and close the door. Then Ginny quietly followed him down the hall, stopping in front of the closed door. Years of growing up at the Burrow came in useful: she stood nonchalantly by the door, not looking at all as though she were listening intently.

The voices through the door were faint at first: she couldn't distinguish words. Then Blaise's voice rose above the others. "Because I've just learned that Granger's spreading a rumor that Harry Potter's come back from the dead, that's why. The elves will respond to that, I assure you. Oh yes, they will testify – making the verdict certain."

Another voice spoke up, in a sharp German accent. "Then Swivingham will to your Azkaban Prison be sent after all. Hm. Does your Ministry have an appeal process we might attempt? If not, at the very least we can a goodly bonus guarantee him, once his term he's served..."

"No, we've no options left," replied Blaise, "but he does. He can turn Crown's Evidence in exchange for immunity from prosecution. And that's exactly what he'll do. You gentlemen have no idea of the

horror that is Azkaban, but trust me, Swivingham will do anything to avoid it. To save his own skin, he will betray us."

There was a hubbub of angry voices as several people tried to speak at once. Ginny tried to focus on specific comments, until one smooth voice spoke. "I think we're agreed," he began, and the others fell silent at once, "that it would be in everyone's best interest that our good friend Jack remain silent. Our faithful servant would not wish to be forsown, after all... and it would be merciful to keep him out of Azkaban, if what you tell us of it is true."

"Setting an example to the end," said Blaise after a moment. "Very well, gentlemen, I'll take care of it. It shall be done discreetly—" Blaise stopped talking... a little too quickly. Ginny realized he must have heard or suspected her presence, and was even now heading to open the door.

She didn't hesitate: before he could reach the door, she knocked briskly. "Blaise?" she called, in a perfectly natural tone.

The door swung open immediately. Blaise stood filling the doorway, his face carefully neutral; behind him Ginny could see his three visitors. "I'm sorry to interrupt," she said apologetically, "but there's an owl from the Ministry here for you."

Visibly, Blaise relaxed a bit. "Of course," he said easily. "If you'll forgive me, gentlemen? Duty calls." He left the drawing room, closing the door behind him, and motioned Ginny to precede him to the manor's foyer, where owls usually arrived.

"Sorry," she said again as they walked. "I know you like me to stay with our main party, but if the Ministry is owling you on a Friday night, it must be important."

"No, you did right."

"And Aurora Sinclair brought a new guest tonight. I thought you might want to bedazzle her with the famous Blaise Zabini charm." Ginny smiled impishly, and Blaise returned her smile automatically.

"First the owl, then our guests," he promised. Ginny knew there would be an owl from the Ministry waiting for Blaise at the foyer. Every Fire Party, at least one owl arrived from the Ministry,

sometimes more than one. She'd never disturbed Blaise with their contents – she knew the back room sessions were important, politically – but simply read the messages, which were often trivial matters, and dealt with them on her own initiative with no one the wiser. She was perfectly capable of handling such routine details, and events had always proven her right.

The owl waiting in the foyer wouldn't bear anything vital, but it would be from the Ministry, and would give Ginny the excuse she needed to be loitering outside the drawing room door. As long as she enjoyed Blaise's confidence, that was all that mattered to her.

Hermione and Ginny emerged from the Pensieve. Each took a moment to regain her bearings; Hermione recovered first. "And you haven't seen or heard from those three wizards since Friday?"

Ginny swayed on her feet slightly, still dizzy from the trip into her own memory. "Um, no. I didn't even learn their names. But you can see why I got so worried, when I read about Swivingham's death yesterday...!"

With a swirl of her wand, Hermione collected the memory into a flowing silvery thread, wrapping it around her wand's tip. She delicately removed it from the Pensieve before replying. "Yes, but even in the worst case, you should be safe enough," she told Ginny, as she deposited the memory into a glass phial. "After all, there wouldn't be much point in killing or Obliviating you, when we've effectively got your testimony in here." She held up the phial, now filled with silvery fluid.

"You could use that in court?" Ginny asked. "Whether I'm there or not?"

"Well, yes. That's exactly what this is for, after all," pointed out Hermione, patting the Pensieve's rim. "This is one of the Ministry's evidentiary Pensieves. As the name implies, it displays the memory exactly as you experienced it, providing an eyewitness account. No more, no less."

Ginny nodded, then furrowed her brows. "But Memory Charms?"

"Would be apparent as a blurring or discontinuity in the flow of events. If necessary, we'd have a Ministry Obliviator scan the witness for Memory Charms."

"Ah," said Ginny, her doubts not quite dispelled.

Together they made their way to the kitchen, where Hermione had set out the Indian take-away she'd brought home with her. "I need to restock my larder, if you're to be staying here more than a few days," she joked.

"I'll pay you back," Ginny offered, taking a seat at the kitchen table. "And this smells heavenly, thanks."

They make inconsequential small talk as they ate. Ginny was as easy and personable as Hermione remembered; several times, she had to catch herself as she fell back into old habits, from their shared nights in the bedroom at the Burrow. She had no doubt that Ginny was making a conscious effort to get back on her sister-in-law's good side.

It wasn't until they'd nearly finished their dinners that Ginny returned to the issue of her Pensieve memories. "So, then," she said, pushing away her plate and somberly meeting Hermione's gaze. "Now you've seen it, what do you think?"

Hermione chose her words carefully. "Nothing you heard was an unambiguous death sentence for Swivingham. If this memory were presented as trial evidence, I don't doubt that defense counsel would show how it could be interpreted in more than one way."

"That's true," said Ginny, brightening. "Blaise never really said anything about Swivingham being killed, did he? I knew he couldn't be involved in anything shady..."

Who exactly are we trying to convince, Ginny? asked Hermione silently.

"I mean," continued Ginny blithely, "if they were all talking about something criminal or dangerous, wouldn't you think they'd put an Imperturbable Charm on the door? Or Silencing Charms, or something?"

"Mm hmm. On the other hand, using those charms would demonstrate to everyone in the manor that he had something to hide."

"Oh. Yeah. I suppose..." said a deflated Ginny. After a moment, she looked up at Hermione with a hint of a smirk on her lips. "So why'd you have an Imperturbable Charm on your door last night?"

Hermione was unprepared to have the tables turned on her. "Oh! Um. Well, no reason, I suppose..." she fumbled.

Ginny's smirk widened. "Come on, you can tell me."

"Well... I didn't want to say, but..." Hermione played at hesitation, as an excellent excuse occurred to her. "It was because... well, I'm sorry, Ginny, but you snore."

The smirk vanished immediately. "I do not snore!"

"Yes, you do, I'm afraid. I mean, you snored back when we roomed together in the Burrow, but nothing like last night. And I'm not talking little ladylike snores, either." Wickedly, Hermione imitated the loudest, most adenoidal snore possible, and added, "And I thought Ron was bad." She gave an apologetic shrug. "Sorry, Ginny."

"Hmph," Ginny scowled, crossing her arms. Pleased that she'd diverted Ginny's curiosity, Hermione began to clear the dishes and put them in the sink.

"Speaking of Ron," said Ginny abruptly, "he Floo-called here twice today. Said something about not being able to see you in your office."

"I was in and out most of the day," Hermione confirmed.

"Anyway, after his last call, he owled you a message." Ginny indicated Hermione's desk, where a hastily tied scroll sat among her paperwork. Intrigued, Hermione went to her desk and opened the scroll. She read it silently... then read it again, to be sure.

"Well?" Ginny demanded at length, unable to contain herself.

"Well, I'd have to say this is the most fulsome screed of remorse and contrition that I've ever had the dubious pleasure of reading." Hermione glanced from the scroll to Ginny and translated, "He says he's really, really sorry."

"Well, that's good, isn't it?"

"As far as it goes, I suppose." Though she knew Ginny dearly wanted to read the note for herself, Hermione re-rolled the scroll and slipped it into her pocket. There were certain details in the note that she didn't want to share... at least not with Ginny.

"Well, I need to return the Pensieve to the Ministry tonight," she announced. "I can pick up some groceries while I'm out, so decide what you'd like to eat while you're here. And, er, is there anything else I can pick up for you? I know I don't have a lot of diversions in my home..."

"I was listening to Rose's WWN hookup most of the day. But... if you could pick me up a copy of this month's Modern Quidditch, that'd help," said Ginny gratefully.

"I'll do that," laughed Hermione. "Why don't you wash the dishes, while I pack the Pensieve?" Upon Ginny's eager nod, she left the kitchen and headed straight for her bedroom. Closing the door behind her, she hissed, "Harry? Are you there?"

Harry's head appeared. "So what did you see? I didn't want to try following you into the Pensieve... didn't know if I'd be visible inside it, Cloak or no..."

Hermione overrode him. "Can you come with me back to the Ministry?" she asked urgently. "I've no time to explain, I don't want Ginny to suspect anything – but can you meet me there? In the Atrium again, and follow me to my office? It's very important, Harry."

His jaw clenched once... then he resolutely nodded and wrapped the Cloak over his head once more. Hermione quickly grabbed one of her pillows, stripped off its pillowcase, and returned to the living room just as Ginny entered from the kitchen. Together they slipped the Pensieve into the pillowcase for transport... then with a friendly nod to Ginny, Hermione Disapparated.

At the Ministry, Hermione shut the door to her office and glanced around. "You can come out now," she announced quietly. She waited a moment, and added, "Trust me, Harry, please."

The air shimmered as Harry shucked off the Cloak. He immediately stepped to the door and put his ear to it, listening. He raised his left hand, where the Elder Wand was strapped, as though he were about to cast a warding spell... despite its being after hours, and the Ministry being nearly unpopulated, he clearly felt very exposed and vulnerable being there.

Evidently, whatever protections he detected on the room seemed to satisfy him: he lowered his hand without casting anything. "All right, Hermione, what's on with this? I'm guessing you want me to see Ginny's memory in the Pensieve...?"

"Yes and no," Hermione replied, pulling the phial from her pocket. A little explanation, she thought, might help distract him enough to settle his nerves. "An evidentiary Pensieve is limited, deliberately so, in what it can show us. But in theory, a Pensieve can draw on more than the memory being displayed: it can extract memetic information from the gestalt of the collective unconscious itself."

"Uh huh. And what's that mean, when it's at home?"

"It means a powerful Pensieve can actually show details that the memory's observer didn't herself see." She walked behind her desk and, with a grunt, picked up a large, heavy wooden box. She set the box on her desk as she continued, "Unfortunately, the spells needed to create such a powerful Pensieve have been lost for generations. There are only a few left in the world. One of them, as you may recall, belonged to Albus Dumbledore."

"Yeah," said Harry with dawning understanding, as he recalled his sixth-year lessons with Dumbledore. Now that he considered, his Pensieve trips into Tom Riddle's life had seemed far more detailed than would be possible if only a single person's memories had been used: events behind closed doors, or out of the person's line of sight, had been fully visible. "So I'm guessing that you've got Dumbledore's Pensieve there?"

"Right in one," smiled Hermione, lifting the box's lid to reveal the rune-graven stone basin. "I sent a note to Professor McGonagall

earlier today. She's been good enough to loan us Dumbledore's Pensieve in the past." She opened the phial and poured Ginny's memory into the waiting Pensieve. "Of course," she added, "precisely because it does show more than one witness's experience, it can't be used as evidence in a trial – but that won't matter to us, if it points us in the right direction. And I think we'll both want to see this."

And seizing Harry's hand, they plunged into the roiling silvery mist.

They entered the memory at the point where Ginny was listening by the drawing room door. Without letting go of Harry's hand, Hermione walked through the door – literally through it, as though it were an illusion – and found herself in the room with Zabini and three others. "Because I've just learned that Granger's spreading a rumor that Harry Potter's come back from the dead," Zabini was saying forcefully, "that's why. The elves will respond to that, I assure you. Oh yes, they will testify – making the verdict certain." He sat back in his seat and regarded the three wizards before him: dressed in elegant robes that bespoke wealth without flaunting it, they carried an air of authority... and danger.

The wizard on his left met Zabini's gaze coolly. Hermione noted him carefully: thin, with high cheekbones, wispy blond hair, and deep-set blue eyes. Calluses on the bridge of his nose suggested he normally wore spectacles. "Then Swivingham will to your Azkaban Prison be sent after all," he said in a sharp German accent. "Hm. Does your Ministry have an appeal process we might attempt? If not, at the very least we can a goodly bonus guarantee him, once his term he's served..."

Zabini made a slicing gesture with one hand. "No, we've no options left, but he does. He can turn Crown's Evidence in exchange for immunity from prosecution. And that's exactly what he'll do. You gentlemen have no idea of the horror that is Azkaban, but trust me, Swivingham will do anything to avoid it. To save his own skin, he will betray us."

The German wizard began an angry retort, but was interrupted by the second wizard, the one on Zabini's right: swarthy skin, curly black hair, massive muscular build. He favored heavy gold jewellery. From the Mediterranean, Hermione guessed; his accent sounded neither Italian nor French, but some polyglot blend. "You put too

much faith in these dementors of yours," he snarled. "I 'ave never believed they're the deterrent you and your Ministry claim. It's not as though we've 'ad problems in recruitment, after all."

"Amazing, then, that you ever saw the need to approach me, Castigni," Zabini riposted. "Or do you think your gains here would have been as great, or as rapid, without my aid?"

"Irrelevant to the discussion," put in the German. "Swivingham will not to betray us be moved if your dementors aren't fearsome enough to discourage crime in the first place...!"

The third wizard, who sat directly facing Zabini, had yet said nothing. He looked to be from the Middle East: hawk-nosed, a trim black beard, wearing a neat turban. He accepted a goblet of some foaming drink from a young, female house-elf, and sipped as he listened to the growing argument. Finally, he handed the goblet back to the elf and raised a finger. "I think we're agreed," he began smoothly, and the others fell silent at once, "that it would be in everyone's best interest that our good friend Jack remain silent. Our faithful servant would not wish to be forsown, after all... and it would be merciful to keep him out of Azkaban, if what you tell us of it is true." He smiled serenely as he watched Zabini, and waited.

After a moment, Zabini gave a jerky nod of reluctant understanding. "Setting an example to the end," he said slowly. "Very well, gentlemen, I'll take care of it. It shall be done discreetly—" Abruptly, Zabini stopped – his head swiveling to look at the closed door. Raising his hand for silence, he quickly rose from his chair and took a step – as a brisk knock sounded.

"Blaise?" came Ginny's voice through the door.

Hermione nodded, satisfied by what she'd seen. She turned to collect Harry... to see him kneeling before the house-elf, studying her features closely. By elven standards, indeed by human standards, she was quite comely. Her only garb comprised a long translucent veil, strategically arranged to cover without concealing, and held in place by a fine gold chain around her waist. "She reminds me of one of the elves that visited Enthalpy House," Harry said, unnecessarily whispering.

"Brillig," Hermione automatically supplied, then gasped as she looked more closely. The house-elf in the Pensieve was obviously the Arab's personal servant – but more importantly, she was the very image of one of the witnesses against Swivingham! The elf named Fatima...

"Swivingham hinted there was a... Levantine connection to the Cartel Lords," Hermione said softly. She took Harry's wrist, pointed her wand upward, and together they left the Pensieve scene.

"Levantine'?" Harry asked.

"One of the six witness elves, one you haven't met yet, is named Fatima," explained Hermione, as she hurriedly collected Ginny's memory from the Pensieve. "She looks almost exactly like the elf servant we saw. Enough to be sisters! It can't be coincidence."

"Wizards have bred house-elves as servants for centuries," Harry commented. "Stands to reason that someone, somewhere, would breed them for looks, as well as everything else." He shrugged. "And it makes sense it would be in Arabia. What do they call those girl-slaves in Paradise – houris? Pretty house-elves would be like houris on earth."

"In every way," muttered Hermione in disgust, as she replaced the lid on the Pensieve box. Small wonder Swivingham imported elven sex-slaves from that region! Hermione was willing to bet that Fatima had been charged with instructing the other elves on "technique".

"So..." Harry began to pace back and forth in Hermione's office. Since the office wasn't all that big, he was more or less reduced to constantly turning in a circle. "So what does this tell us, then? Are these three wizards the Cartel Lords that Swivingham worked for? From what we heard, I'm guessing that Zabini killed Swivingham, or arranged it – does Zabini work for the Lords, too, or is he one of them? And did we hear... there was a name mentioned! 'Castigni' – does that ring a bell with you?"

"No, but I wouldn't have expected it to: we know how the Lords prefer to remain anonymous. Mm, we can forward the name to the various Ministries in Europe, see if anyone has a dossier on him. And we have physical descriptions for all three of them, which we can also forward." Hermione took out a sheet of parchment and

began to make notes. "As for Swivingham's murder, I made some progress on that today. I know the agent Zabini used, but not the method. I'm still working on a plan, an idea really, to bring the agent in for questioning, without anyone being aware of it." She scribbled furiously.

"Working on an idea?"

She did not want to discuss the details of her plan with Harry, lest he offer to help with the worst part of it. "Er, yes. Right now, I'm trying to find a way to persuade the, er, target to accept a Portkey." She swept her quill in the air between them, dismissing the topic, and went back to Harry's previous comment. "And, from what I saw, I'm guessing that Zabini's not one of the Lords, but he's hardly a hireling as Swivingham was."

"Ah. More like Fudge, under Malfoy's thumb?"

"More like an ally, I'd say," she replied, now comfortably in her element. "Think about it: Zabini has an agenda, a political agenda. For that, he needs political influence. He's got plenty of that already – Merlin, he's tapped to be the next Minister of Magic when Kingsley passes on. Therefore, any entente he may have with the Lords must serve to increase his influence, or it does him no good. No, he won't jeopardize his agenda by becoming part of a criminal cartel, no matter how high he could rise there."

"But then, why would he...?"

"Work with the Cartel at all? Agendas need financing, Harry." Hermione looked up from her note-taking to watch Harry, still pacing around the office – except what she'd taken for nervous energy was instead a constant monitoring for intruders. He'd picked his Cloak up off the floor, and looked ready to vanish under it at anyone's approach. "Oh, honestly, Harry," she tsked, "do you think you're the only person who augments the standard wards with their own spells? Of course I've put extra defenses on my office."

"Oh. Uh, right. Of course, sorry..." Harry stopped pacing, a trace of embarrassment on his face. "Yeah, you've probably been doing that for years, haven't you?"

Tempting though it was to let Harry believe that, honesty forced Hermione to say, "Um, no. Only for a couple of days. Since the night I didn't get Obliviated." She rolled her eyes at his smirk. "Yes, thanks to your extra defenses."

"Just checking." His smirk turned into a warm smile as he raised his hand, as though laying it against a curtain to feel its material. "Hm, I recognize Cave Inimicum and Salvio Hexia, but there are a couple here I don't know."

"I like to think I've learned a few things since the Horcrux Hunt," Hermione smiled back.

"Me too." Harry's smile turned rueful. "'Course, it would have been hard not to have learned since then – I was so incredibly stupid. Most important quest of the War, of my entire life, and what did I do to get ready for it? I watched you pack."

"You let me do what I do best. When the fighting started, I let you do what you do best. I was often afraid that I was, well, a liability to you in combat..." She paused, brows lowering, as a sudden thought occurred. "Harry, when you were using the Lactus charm for that farming couple, did I hear you say you used your holly wand? The one I... I broke?" At his nod, she continued, "But I thought Mr. Ollivander told you..."

"Ollivander didn't reckon with the Elder Wand. He only thought of it in terms of killing, remember? 'The Deathstick', he called it. But using it, I was able to fix my old wand – a simple Reparo was all it took." A half-grin on his lips, he bent down to look Hermione in the eyes. "Have you been feeling... guilty about breaking my wand? For all this time?"

"No! ... Well, perhaps a little." Hermione hunched over her parchment and resumed writing notes, well aware of her red face. Trust Harry to pick up on that... She began again, "So, anyway, Harry, you don't have to worry about being in my office. There are enough wards to keep anyone noticing."

"I appreciate that, thanks." He looked slightly more relaxed.

"And certainly more wards than you had when you visited Ron in Diagon Alley last night."

There was a pause so long that Hermione wondered if her friend had been Petrified. At long last, he sighed resignedly and said, "You weren't supposed to know about that."

"Ron wrote me a very apologetic letter today. In which he made repeated reference to 'how Harry would have wanted things'. I got top marks in Arithmancy – let's assume I can add two and two, shall we?" Feeling more secure now that Harry was on the defensive, she raised her head and pinned him with a gimlet eye. "Harry, I appreciate what you were trying to do, but I can fight my own battles. Certainly my battles with Ron are between him and me."

"I know. I saw you battling last night, remember? My little sojourn wasn't about fighting your battles for you, Hermione. It was... it was..."

"It was what? I don't see what else I could call it but your assuming that I can't..."

"NO ONE gets to..." Harry stopped, drew a long, deep breath, and continued more quietly, but with no less force. "No one – no one – gets to hurt you, and get away with it. It has nothing to do with defending you or sheltering you or fighting your battles for you or anything like that. It's just..." He stopped again, and looked at her almost pleadingly – as though he expected her to complete his thought aloud, as she so often did.

But for once, she was at a loss for words: too astonished by his sudden vehemence to speak.

"It's like Scotland," he finally said. He thrust his hands in his pockets and spun away from her. "I'm sure you know the motto of Scotland."

'Nemo me impune lacessit', Hermione's memory supplied. 'No one assaults me with impunity'. Except in Harry's case, it's 'No one assaults me with impunity'. Sweet Merlin, was this the man who refused to come back to the wizarding world? Who so reluctantly came to the Ministry two days ago? Yet he risked everything to go to Diagon Alley last night to deal with Ron...

"Funny thing is," said Harry, still unable to face her, "a month ago, I'd have said that for Ron, too." It was eerie, how his thoughts

seemed to parallel her own. He was almost mumbling as he finished, "But, but not after... after last night."

"Or Ginny?" she whispered.

"Or Ginny."

Without hesitating an instant, Hermione rose from the desk, walked up behind Harry, and wrapped her arms around him. He stiffened momentarily at her touch, then relaxed as she pressed herself against his back. Hermione rested her cheek against his shoulder and simply held him. She wouldn't embarrass him further by making him face her, but she was determined to give gratitude and affection in the only way, at that moment, that he could accept: her embrace.

When Harry started to lean back against her, she knew he understood.

A deliberate change of subject was needed, to break the tension. "Well, speaking of Ginny: her Pensieve evidence probably isn't enough to endanger her life. But Zabini wouldn't know that. If he suspects her at all, he may take action against her 'just in case'. As much as I'd prefer otherwise, she should spend at least one more night at Enthalpy House."

"As you say," he sighed after a few seconds. "At least she was a good girl today: she didn't try to breach the wards or contact anyone."

"You know that...? Oh, of course you would."

"Yeah. She's only used a few little spells... a personal grooming charm this morning, little things like that." Harry covered her hands with his own, and squeezed them gently. Then he stepped forward, out of their span, and turned to face her again. "I assume I'll be in your bedroom again tonight? Right, then I'll wait here a bit... give you a chance to, um, get ready for bed before I Apparate in."

"And stop at the market for provisions," Hermione reminded him, stepping back to her desk. She folded the parchment and placed it in her pocket along with the phial of Ginny's memories. She was about to Disapparate when Harry said, in a voice so quiet that she almost didn't hear it, "And Hermione? You weren't a liability."

His green eyes were fixed on her now, bright as jewels, and piercing to her soul. "You were never a liability," he went on. "If I were going into battle tomorrow ... I'd ..." Harry paused, seeking the right words, and finished, "There's no one I'd rather have by me." A smile flashed on his lips, born of relief and thanks, before he swirled the Cloak over his shoulders and vanished from view.

There was no logical reason why that tribute, those words of acknowledgment, should cause Hermione's heart to beat more wildly, nor her eyes to sting. She hastily wiped them with the back of her hand, gave a return smile of thanks to the seemingly empty room, and left while she still trusted herself to not say anything.

XX: Queens' Gambits

How in seven hells could Hermione ever think she's a liability?

In the wee hours of the morning, Harry sat on the floor of the darkened bedroom at Enthalpy House, next to Hermione's bed. He'd done better last night than the night before: he'd remembered the existence of Cushioning Charms, and had applied them to the floor and wall. He even thought he might actually have dozed off for a few minutes, sometime during the night. He couldn't say for sure.

It had been a wakeful night like so many before – and unlike any other. He hadn't used the time to plan his next "guardian angel" project, as he'd done on sleepless nights in the past. He hadn't spent the hours monitoring the wards, or checking to see that Ginny had tried nothing suspicious. He hadn't even spent the night worrying about the effect the Hallows were having on him, or seeking a way eliminate them forever – though Merlin knew he ought to have been.

He'd filled the hours watching Hermione as she slept.

It astounded Harry that Hermione might see herself as anything less than superbly capable. Oh, her flaws were real, and he was well aware of them; she'd made mistakes, some of them huge, and he readily acknowledged the fact. But as far as he was concerned, those were like smudges on a stained glass window, barely noticeable amidst the sunlight shining through.

Even in battle – who fought by my side at the Department of Mysteries? At the café after the Death Eaters attacked Bill's wedding? At Hogwarts? I told her the truth last night, there's no one I'd rather have by my side in a fight.

Except I'd never want her in a fight, because I'd be so scared of anything happening to her.

He'd begun to worry, earlier in the evening, when he'd Apparated to Enthalpy House – hidden under his Cloak, of course – and discovered that Hermione hadn't yet arrived, despite her leaving the Ministry a good half-hour before he had. He'd fretted in the living room, silently watching Ginny work the Daily Prophet's crossword puzzle, growing more and more worried that Hermione was roaming

about, while minions of the Cartel Lords wanted to Obliviate her, or worse. He tried to comfort himself that Hermione could buy groceries anywhere in Britain, Muggle or Magical, so the chance of her being spotted was slim.

But that comfort had been dashed when Hermione'd arrived with groceries – and the latest issues of Modern Quidditch and Quaffle & Snitch for Ginny. Which could only have been obtained in a wizarding shop, greatly increasing her risk! Not until almost bedtime, when Hermione had mentioned to Ginny (undoubtedly for Harry's benefit) that she'd "borrowed" the magazines from the Department of Magical Games and Sports, did Harry relax.

And now, here I am, sitting on the floor watching her, as if she were going to disappear any minute. I have to find some way to keep her protected while she's not in the cottage, under its wards. Unless I could extend the wards in some way? Maybe charm an anchor point for them, small enough for her to wear...

He lifted his head slightly to look at her bed. Hermione carefully slept on one half of the bed, as she always did – as though years of married life had made a former necessity into a habit. The empty half of the bed was reserved space, as it were. Reserved for the husband whom Hermione couldn't divorce... but who thought nothing of pleasuring himself with another woman.

Out of nowhere, Harry remembered a complaint Ron had once made, just after the Quidditch World Cup: "Why is everything I own rubbish?" Harry had maintained a sympathetic silence at the time, not really having an answer to give. He had an answer now.

Because when anything good does come into your life, you whinging git, you toss it aside.

Hermione had told him of the breakup of her marriage, but the raw fact hadn't sunk home with Harry until Monday night, when he'd seen her and Ron argue... and she'd thrown Ron out, once and for all. Now, staring at the empty half of the bed, Harry found himself wondering if there was anything he could do to help – anything at all. He'd helped so many others over the last fifteen years; surely the Master of the Deathly Hallows could help here as well. But he knew, without needing to think it through in detail, that Ron's and Hermione's marital problems were beyond even the power of the

Hallows to repair. Even when it came to simply breaking the power of their vows, so they could divorce... well, only one idea had come to Harry, and to his credit, he had immediately rejected it, with the deepest sense of shame. Ron might be a whinging git, but he didn't deserve to have the power of Death remove him from Hermione's life.

I have to be better than that, he told himself. He still stared at the empty half of the bed with a certain resentment.

Hermione made the soft sound, halfway between a sigh and a moan, which Harry had learned meant she was awakening. Harry's attention came back to her face as she snorted softly, licked her lips, and opened one eye. "It's safe," Harry told the eye. "Good morning, Hermione."

Both eyes opened. "Morning, anyway," she grumbled as she sat up. She was wearing the opaque pajamas again, Harry noticed, not the camisole – probably because of the change of season, he told himself firmly, and not as a sop to their mutual embarrassment. "I should shower and head to the Ministry early. I've a lot to do today."

Harry tilted his head curiously.

"Tomorrow's the opening session of the Conference on International Crime," Hermione explained, correctly interpreting his unspoken question. "Which Zabini, of all people, is chairing! If he's really in the Cartel Lords' pocket, the whole Conference becomes a pointless waste of time, at best. He'll use it to cover his tracks, or consolidate his position to the point that even with hard evidence, I wouldn't be able to prosecute him. He might even deliberately divert suspicions away from the Lords. So not only do I need to find that hard evidence... I need to find it today." She swung her legs out of bed and stood. Briskly she walked to one of the bedroom's bookcases (there wasn't a room in Enthalpy House that had no bookcases) and pulled a volume off a lower shelf.

"Ginny's Pensieve memories, I take it, won't produce any results in time?" Harry stayed on the floor, watching as she leafed through the tome.

"They pointed us in the right direction... they showed Zabini was responsible for arranging Swivingham's murder. And I already know

who his, er, agent was ... but proving it is something else again. I have to find a way to do that today." She broke off at that point, unusually for Hermione, and Harry wondered why she was reluctant to talk about it.

One possibility occurred to him. He tried a gentle probe. "You mean, that 'idea' you mentioned last night? Getting a Portkey to your target before he knows about it?"

"Erm, yes. I'd thought about owling him, with the envelope uncharmed but the letter inside it a Portkey. But the type of business he's in, he's sure to have Secrecy Sensors checking his mail – much more complete Sensors than Filch ever used. So that won't work." Without meeting Harry's eye, Hermione tossed the book onto the bed. She stepped to her wardrobe and began to search for clothes.

"Hm, yes, I see your problem," Harry said seriously. "But there must be a way to deliver a Portkey without being spotted. If only you knew some bloke who isn't stopped by wards, and who had a Cloak that could keep Sensors from detecting him. That'd be brilliant."

The robes fell from Hermione's hands. She spun to face him, her mouth a round O of astonishment.

"I assume you were going to get around to asking me sooner or later," he noted matter-of-factly. "I just thought we might save some time."

"I was..." Hermione swallowed, the surprise on her face fighting with indignation. She cleared her throat and started again. "I wasn't going to ask you. How could I? You've made it clear you want as little to do with the wizarding world as possible."

Harry nodded in agreement. "But I thought I also made it clear," he added, "that I was not abandoning you, ever again."

Her expression turned neutral, but with a hint of speculation. "Not abandoning me means staying," she said after a moment.

He closed his eyes helplessly at that. He couldn't stay, couldn't be part of the wizarding world, not as long as the Hallows were intact and he was their Master, and she surely understood that. "Hermione, that's a discussion for another time," he finally allowed, opening his

eyes. "Maybe I could sort of, y'know, be on call, like I am with Ted." He stood and dusted his backside, then met her gaze squarely. "Right now, though, we have a Portkey to deliver."

By the set of her mouth and the light in her eyes, Harry could tell that she was intent on continuing the discussion right then and there. He timed it perfectly: just as she was drawing breath to speak, he added, "And we're on a deadline."

Hermione closed her mouth, swallowing whatever she'd been about to say. Harry knew he had, miraculously, won an argument with Hermione Granger – or at least, postponed losing an argument.

After a long pause, Hermione spoke again, somewhat edgily. "The target is Swivingham's solicitor, Edwin Lovinett." She picked up the fallen robes and draped them over the edge of the bed, then found a scrap of parchment and a quill, and began to write. She didn't stop talking as she did these things. "Dennis Creevey connected Swivingham's death to a similar death after the First Voldemort War, and Lovinett was involved on both occasions. Oh, I still haven't deduced how he could have done it – but we've enough evidence now to bring him in for questioning. Under Veritaserum, and that's something else I need to do today, put in a requisition for Veritaserum."

She finished writing on the parchment, and blew on it gently to dry the ink. When she handed it to Harry, her voice had lost its edge. "Here's the address of his law office. When everything's ready, I'll give you a Ministry-approved Portkey – I'm sure you could make one, but I don't want him able to claim this wasn't an official proceeding – and we'll schedule when you'll use it. We'll have to work on a pretty tight schedule, but if it's done right, we'll corral Lovinett without anybody even knowing he's gone."

He nodded as he accepted the parchment, noting the address wasn't on Diagon Alley, as he'd expected, but on Queen Street. "Anything else while we wait?"

Hermione shook her head. "Not for you. There are other... arrangements... that have to be made, but I need to... well, let's just say I can't delegate them." Her face showed a moment of apprehension, before it broke into its first smile that morning. "But

now, Mr. Potter, if you'll give a lady a few minutes' privacy, I need to shower and dress."

He relaxed into a responding smile. "Yeah, I'll go back to my flat and do the same. Call me on my mobile when you want me. Or send your Patronus – my flat's private enough."

"I will," she promised, then stepped closer to him. "And Harry? I really wasn't going to ask – but I'm awfully glad you volunteered. Thank you." She leaned in and gave him a firm kiss on the cheek. Then she stepped back, smiled warmly, and waited a moment, watching him.

It was all Harry could do to stand there in a daze, blinking at her – his brain seemed to be simultaneously frozen in place and racing in overdrive. His hand slowly came up to touch his cheek, where she'd kissed him.

Hermione's smile broadened. She made little shooing motions with her hands – he managed to kick-start his brain enough to take the hint. He unbuttoned his pajama top, unwrapped the Cloak from its usual place around his waist, draped it over his shoulders, and Disapparated.

When it came to breakfast, Hermione reflected, Ginny was perfectly competent – probably some remnant of kitchen training from Molly, when she was growing up in the Burrow – but though they made a filling breakfast, she couldn't help comparing Ginny's scrambled eggs to Harry's omelets, just a few days earlier.

(But really, though, there was no comparison.)

"Well, I'm just glad I'm able to help out around here," Ginny declared when Hermione had thanked her for breakfast.

"It shouldn't be for too much longer," Hermione assured her. "I want you to spend one more night here, just to be safe. Zabini is chairing an international conference tomorrow, which should draw his attention from anything that might have happened at your last Fire Party."

"Not that I saw anything that would have, er, compromised him, though – right?"

"Not that I could identify." Hermione finished her coffee in a long gulp, which let her drop the topic. "You could probably go back to the Harpies' training camp tomorrow, if you like. I'll give Ron credit for that: the more you stay with your normal routine, the less suspicious you'll appear."

"Um, yeah. Ron." Ginny pushed a bit of egg around her plate with her fork. "I know nothing really excuses what he did, Hermione, but..."

"I can't help but think," interrupted Hermione, smiling but with a certain asperity, "that however you were planning to end that sentence, you'd be better off stopping there."

Ginny cleared her throat. "Right, got it. Sorry, Hermione. I just want..." She trailed off.

"Want everything to be better?" Hermione's expression and voice softened. "Me too, Ginny, me too." She stood and carried her dishes to the sink. "Thank you again for breakfast, Ginny. Shall I bring back anything tonight?"

As Ginny shook her head, Hermione picked up her briefcase and Disapparated. Ginny busied herself cleaning the breakfast dishes, waiting to see if Hermione had forgotten anything. After a few minutes, she decided Hermione wouldn't be returning before evening.

Drying her hands, she left the kitchen and tried the door to Hermione's bedroom. The door opened easily, which was as she'd expected: from what she'd seen, the Imperturbable Charm was only used at night. Ginny didn't enter the bedroom; instead, after a quick glance around the room, she quietly closed the door again... before heading for her own room. She hadn't anticipated this turn of events... but if the years had taught her anything, it was to Be Ready. If she was leaving tomorrow, tonight would be her last window of opportunity.

And she would be ready.

Sheryl watched in amusement as a slightly befuddled Hermione entered their offices, glancing back over her shoulder. "Morning, ma'am."

"Good morning, Sheryl. Um." Hermione shook her head. "Grimble just asked if I wanted to be part of the Pumpkin Pool this year."

"Grimble runs the Pumpkin Pool every year. 'Whose pumpkins will be biggest by Hallowe'en?' It's his pet passion."

"Well, yes, I knew about it... but still, he's never invited me to join before." It's odd, how many people have stopped to say hello in the last few days, or make small talk, she thought. Odd, but rather nice, really...

She gave a mental shake and returned to the present. "Well, let's get to work. Sheryl, would you contact the Potions lab, and tell them I'll need some Veritaserum for a field interrogation today? I'd like it by noon, just to have some leeway. Then contact the Auror stockroom for a set of Patches – or no, not you, it would attract too much attention." Hermione reminded herself of the need for secrecy: she had no idea where in the Ministry Zabini might have supporters. It's why I have to limit the potions I want from the Potions lab... hence my act of contrition later.

"Send Creevey," she decided, "and have him contact the stockroom. Tell him to specify 'open destination'...I'll take care of completing the locator charms. Assuming this works..." she added in an undertone.

She barely heard Sheryl's acknowledgment as she stepped into her chambers and settled down to think. Once they had Lovinett in custody, and dosed with Veritaserum, they might learn how he'd killed Swivingham. But Hermione's experience in courtroom interrogation had taught her to only ask questions to which she already knew the answers.

When Harry called up Swivingham's shade, we learned that the Imperius Curse had been used on him, to make him kill himself. That's undeniable. Lucius Malfoy implicated Lovinett in the death of Castle, with the same modus operandi. That's equally undeniable. Therefore Lovinett performed the Curse on Swivingham, and therefore had to have a wand inside the cell. But I saw Lovinett

surrender his wand to Nelson at the guard desk. Again, undeniable...

"He had to take one inside – but he couldn't have! Uurrgghh!" she cried aloud, resisting the urge to pull at her hair.

Sheryl popped her head through the door. "Did you call me?"

"No," said Hermione, lowering her hands from her head. "Just trying to reconcile two impossible conditions." Seeing the interest on her clerk's face, Hermione waved her in. "Brainstorm with me, Sheryl. Lovinett had to bring a wand into Swivingham's cell. How could he have done it? You know the security charms on the holding cell block as well as I do."

"Yeah." Sheryl nodded thoughtfully as she entered the room. "You both had to give up your wands to the guard. Are you thinking he might have had a second wand? Most wizards only have one... at any given time, I mean... I mean, the wand chooses the wizard, and it's rare that a wizard gets chosen by two wands."

Hermione shook her head. "Even if he'd had a second wand, the security charms check for wands, to prevent them from being smuggled in to the prisoners. He couldn't have had a wand – not and get it past the guard's desk undetected."

"And Nelson may be a sloppy guard, but even he wouldn't have tried to hide a security breach with you standing right there." Sheryl chewed her lip. "What did he take into the cell? What did you take in?"

"That's just it. We didn't take anything into the cell." Hermione paused, recalling the scene to her mind. "I didn't take anything, certainly. Lovinett had his legal paperwork, but the guard's desk would have spotted a wand if he'd tucked it amidst the papers..." She blinked. "Inside his briefcase," she finished softly, her eyes glazing. Sheryl watched curiously as Hermione remained motionless, as still as a statue, for a long minute.

"Pumpkins," she eventually murmured. Her eyes clicked into focus again, to see Sheryl's bewildered expression. "Big pumpkins," she clarified, and couldn't resist grinning as her clerk's bewilderment grew.

"You... took... big pumpkins...?" Sheryl said, very slowly, still trying to make sense of Hermione's words.

"Heavens no, of course not. But big pumpkins tell me how the murder was done."

Enshrouded in stealth, Harry stood in the corner of Edwin Lovinett's chamber, at the offices of Gouging & Lovinett. It was getting close to four in the afternoon, and Lovinett had been in and out of his chamber for the last two hours, with no signs of settling down.

Harry fingered the Patch he'd been given by Hermione. The Patch was an Auror-issue Portkey, specifically designed for search-and-snatch missions like this one: an adhesive patch, similar to the nicotine patches used to quit smoking, save that this patch was infused with a Portus charm instead of drugs. This Patch's charm was set to activate three seconds after the backing was peeled away – Harry would have that long to slap the Patch onto some exposed area of Lovinett's skin.

Four o'clock, Hermione told me, thought Harry, or as soon after as possible, when the target is both alone and unobserved. So far, he's been neither.

There was a flutter of wings outside the room, as the afternoon owl-post arrived. A few minutes later, letters in hand, Lovinett entered his chamber – carefully closing the door behind him, Harry was relieved to see – and sat down at his desk. With a silent Colloportus on the door, Harry made sure that no one could unexpectedly barge in and interfere.

Cautiously, Harry left his corner and maneuvered behind Lovinett's chair. As Lovinett opened the first envelope, Harry opened the Cloak, just enough to bring out the Patch. He resealed the Cloak and held the Patch ready.

Out in the office's foyer, the grandfather clock chimed four.

In a single motion, Harry tore the backing off the Patch and slapped it onto the back of Lovinett's neck. The solicitor looked up as if stung, turned around in his seat to stare through Harry's invisible form – and vanished a second later.

Right, that's done. But now how are we supposed to keep the rest of Lovinett's office from noticing he's up and gone? I suppose I could create some sort of diversion... a fire, perhaps? Hermione said I could leave now, so she must have something planned, but still...

There was a pop of air, and Lovinett reappeared.

Harry immediately backed to the wall and readied his wand. Lovinett got away? But no, if he'd escaped from wherever the Portkey sent him, he wouldn't have come back here! Was the destination warded, and bounced him back, or...? He considered his options... stunning Lovinett and side-along Apparating him, perhaps, but where to take him...?

Meanwhile, Lovinett had stepped back to his desk and was looking on either side of it. "Briefcase?" he asked himself, then "Ah." He lifted the briefcase from the floor, set it on the desk, and carefully opened it. He looked inside, then scooped all the legal paperwork from the desktop and unceremoniously stuffed it into the briefcase.

It gave Harry a moment's pause: he'd been watching the solicitor for two hours, and this was atypical behavior. His manner had always been exact, precise, and neat.

Snapping the briefcase shut, Lovinett started to pick it up, hesitated with his hand near the handle, then lifted the briefcase by its sides and tucked it under his arm. He started for the door. Harry aimed his wand, preparing a silent Stupefy spell, but holding it in check while he watched. Something about Lovinett was off...

Lovinett tugged on the doorknob to no avail. He took a step back and cleared his throat – ostentatiously. Expectantly.

He knows I'm here! Harry thought in sudden understanding. Oh, Hermione, you are the clever one!

He cast a Finite on the sealed door. After a moment, Lovinett tried the door again. It opened easily. "Thank you," he primly told the air, and headed out of the office. Harry couldn't resist following as far as the open doorway and looking out.

"I'll be leaving for home now," Lovinett told his clerk. "See that my appointments for today and tomorrow are rescheduled, if you please. I will, of course, be available in case of emergencies – but try not to have any emergencies, hmm?"

"Edwin? What's this?" A portly wizard, somewhat older than Lovinett, had appeared from another chamber. From his age and his familiar address to Lovinett, Harry guessed this must be the senior partner, Geoffrey Gouging. "I can't recall a time when you've left the office early."

"This afternoon's owls brought some distressing news," replied Lovinett. "What with the Ministry and its Conference on International Crime, and all. I've come to the decision this would be an excellent time for me to be... shall we say, unavailable?" He gave the other wizard a knowing smile. The man nodded appreciatively.

With an affable nod in reply, Lovinett continued on his way. Invisible in the doorway, Harry could only smile and shake his head in admiration, before Disapparating away, his own task done.

XXI: Rubicon Crossing

"All right, then," Hermione told Dennis Creevey, looking down at Lovinett's bound and gagged form, "if you and Bones will escort our guest to his new accommodations, I'll be along presently." She handed Dennis the Portkey she'd finished charming. "Don't worry," she added to Lovinett, "your new home will have anti-Apparation charms just like here." She nodded to the massive gate rising next to them, where the great winged boars looked over the entrance to the Hogwarts school grounds.

"Not one of the Ministry's official safe houses, I take it?" Dennis asked with a grin.

"Oh, my goodness, no. No telling who might come looking for us there," Hermione replied, in a chipper voice than nonetheless conveyed menace. She spoke for Lovinett's benefit: the information would keep him off-balance from the start. "This is one of the secure locations Lee Jordan used for Potterwatch broadcasts. Alastor Moody'd set them up, a couple of years before his death, and no one could make a place as secure as Mad-Eye Moody. We'll be quite undisturbed."

"Ex-cellent," said Dennis brightly. He looked up from Lovinett at the two young witches, blonde and redhead, who stood a respectful distance away. He kept his smile fixed in place as he lowered his voice, speaking for her ears only: "I still say we could've found a way to divert them."

"Little chance of that," Hermione muttered. "Keeping them close was the most we could hope for." She looked Dennis in the eye. "I'm bending enough regulations here as it is. Did you think I wanted to run a covert operation from Hogwarts? It was the only way to keep it truly covert."

"Including from spies within the Ministry, you mean," nodded Dennis. His smile turned grimmer. "Thanks for trusting me, then."

"How not?" Hermione watched as Creevey and Bones hauled Lovinett to his feet. The solicitor didn't try to struggle, but his outraged expression spoke volumes. Creevey thrust a bit of parchment in front of Lovinett's face. "Warrant for your arrest," he explained quickly, before putting it back into his pocket. "Must keep

things legal." Checking to ensure he and Bones had firm grips, Dennis raised the Portkey – a Muggle biro – and clicked the end with his thumb. The three wizards promptly vanished.

Hermione sighed as the remaining two observers joined her. "Right, you two. I've let you stay and watch, as I promised. You've seen all there is to see – now will you return to Gryffindor Tower, as you promised?"

"We haven't seen him come back safe and sound," Tori pointed out.

"We don't mind waiting a few extra minutes, Mum," said Rose more respectfully. "All the classes were let out early anyway... something about an accident in Transfigurations, and some animals getting loose. Professor Zebulon was pretty upset."

"So was Headmistress McGonagall," added Tori, "with Professor Zebulon."

Tori's hint of blackmail had been well delivered: Hermione did not need to be reminded that the Headmistress hadn't been told of their presence on Hogwarts grounds. A little counter-pressure of her own seemed called for – Hermione assumed the formidable expression that had caused many a Ministry intern's knees to quake. "Now listen to me, both of you..." she began sternly.

She was met with a fierce glare – not from Tori, but from her own daughter. "You said," Rose firmly reminded her, with a righteous air that brought Hermione up short. Merciful Lord, please tell me I didn't act like this when I was her age. Please.

"Yes," she finally sighed. "I did say, didn't I?" Hermione wished she had the luxury of finding a chair in which to slump, close her eyes, and rub her temples to relieve the stress. Once these two showed up, keeping them here was the lesser evil, remember: I couldn't have them telling the Headmistress. The less she knows, the better.

The less anyone knows, the better. Ginny had the right idea, though she was concerned with Zabini. Justifiably, as it turns out. And I've gone to all these lengths to keep him, or any possible spies, from suspecting I've arrested Lovinett. The Veritaserum was a routine requisition; but I did nothing else that anyone could see. I avoided

the Ministry safe house. I had Dennis requisition the Portkey Patches, but even that was pushing my luck.

There was a pop of air, and Lovinett stood before them. He grinned and began to speak – then spotted Tori and Rose, and promptly lost the grin.

Requisitioning Polyjuice Potion as well would have raised too many red flags, finished Hermione in her head. "Any problems?" she asked Lovinett aloud.

Lovinett shook his head, without taking his eyes off Tori and Rose. "May I ask what you two young ladies are doing here?"

"Young ladies' – I like that," said Rose indignantly.

"I suppose you might say," Tori smirked, sidling up to Lovinett, "that we were up to no good, and managing mischief."

"You took my MAP?" The voice was no longer that of Edwin Lovinett. His features began to morph, until Ted Lupin's face reappeared. It was not a happy face. "You broke into my dorm and stole my Map? How'd you even know about it?"

"Um," said Rose, suddenly cowed. She swallowed nervously, then continued, very earnest. "That night when you had the Veritaserum? You mentioned Marauders... and I remembered Uncle George telling me about them once, so I owled him."

"He had lots to say," affirmed Tori, unfazed by Ted's black look. "About Maps, stolen property, passwords, everything. He was quite eloquent on the topic, actually."

"So when you left in such a hurry this afternoon," finished Rose, "we, um, well, we only borrowed the Map, just to see what was on. And we saw the dots with your name and Mum's name, and then yours disappeared, and well, we had to check it out, didn't we? Wouldn't you?"

Ted glowered at the two of them a moment longer, before turning away huffily to confront Hermione. "Here," he said curtly, extending the briefcase at arms' length. "I brought it, just as you asked. And I left a false trail. Do I get to know why?"

She accepted it carefully by its sides, not touching the handle. "I'm not totally certain myself," she replied in strict truth. "It wouldn't be fair to share untested theories with you. But when I know for certain, I'll tell you. You... you have my word on it." Hermione drew herself up, fully aware that her daughter was watching her in critical expectation, and took a deep breath. "Ted," she said, then started again. "Mr. Lupin. I deeply regret my actions last week. They were unwarranted... and wrong. My only excuse was my anxiety for, for a certain other person. But that's insufficient excuse. I was wrong, and I... I'm sorry."

Ted swallowed the snarky reply that first came to his mind. He could now feel Tori's eyes, watching him as Rose had been watching Hermione. He gained a moment's respite by reaching under his sleeve and peeling the Portkey Patch from his forearm. When he spoke again, he'd schooled the surliness out of his voice... most of it, anyway. "Yeah. I, uh... I understand. You were concerned about..." He flicked a glance at Tori and Rose, and continued without missing a beat. "Him. No, um, no permanent harm done, I reckon." He actually managed a wry semi-shrug. "And anyway, a prankster should expect to be pranked."

"Good boy," cooed Tori, while Rose beamed proudly at her mother.

Hermione left Dennis and Bones waiting for Peasegood at their "secure location" – he would be able to verify whether Lovinett's earlier story to Hermione had been the result of edited memories, as she'd first assumed, or merely a lie. She'd already confirmed her own theory on the murder method.

She Apparated into the living room at Enthalpy House – and stood speechless in surprise. The room was decorated with festive red and gold balloons and sparkly streamers. On a platter on the table sat a small cake, with a single lit candle planted atop it.

From the kitchen came Ginny's voice. "Happy Birthday, Hermione!" The kitchen door opened to admit Ginny, wearing one of Hermione's aprons (a wedding gift from her mum, which she'd never used), and waving a wooden spoon. "Hope you like pasta carbonara – it was best I could do, given what we had on hand."

"Ginny?" Hermione turned slowly in place, taking in the decorations.
"Ginny, what...?"

"Well, technically, your birthday's tomorrow, but since I'm leaving tomorrow... well, I wanted to do this for you tonight." She gestured at the cake. "Spice cake from my stash – Be Ready, that's my motto. C'mon, make a wish and blow out the candle, then we can have dinner."

"Oh. Of course." Hermione sat down on the couch and, with scarcely a pause, blew out the candle. "Your stash?"

"From my overnight bag... well, you saw how much it can carry." Ginny waved her hand from head to feet, reminding Hermione of how she'd been smuggled through the Floo Network. "I keep an emergency stash there, clothes, cosmetics, provisions and such – and I happened to have a cake there, too. And I Transfigured some scarves and stockings into decorations, and presto! Instant birthday party."

"Well, thank you, Ginny." Hermione rose and gave Ginny a quick hug. "Thank you! I truly wasn't expecting this – I'd almost forgotten about my birthday, what with everything that's happened this week."

"I thought maybe," Ginny smiled. "Sorry there's no prezzyes, but we'll make do. Now come on and have some dinner. You must be famished."

All in all, it was a pleasant evening. Ginny had found a light classical selection on WWN, which they left playing in the background. They'd both steered clear of any discussion of Blaise Zabini or Fire Parties, unsurprisingly, but Ginny shared some amusing anecdotes from her career with the Harpies. Hermione was almost reluctant to cut the evening short... but, as she explained to Ginny, she had much work to do before she could sleep. As well as some very private discussions, she added silently.

Once in her bedroom, she set down her briefcase, closed the door and, almost as a reflex, cast the Imperturbable and Muffling Charms. Thus assured of privacy, she surveyed the bedroom with her hands on her hips. "And how much of that did you help with?"

Harry emerged from under his Stealth Cloak. "Nothing, honest. I came straight here when the wards detected her Transfigurations, but she was putting up balloons and all I could do was watch. I didn't even 'help' with the carbonara, and let me tell you, that showed great restraint on my part."

"Yes, I'm sure you could have done a better job, Monsieur Clayman." She tilted her head as a thought occurred to her. "Unless you... ah, I see. You'd planned to cook a birthday dinner for me."

"You said you wanted to try my cooking. Oh, well, there's always tomorrow night. So much for surprise." Harry shook his head in mimed sorrow, then gave her a mischievous grin. "Mind you, I did sneak a taste of pasta tonight when neither of you were looking." He wagged his hand. "Professionally speaking, not bad at all."

"So glad," she laughed. "And thank you again for delivering the Portkey to Lovinett. I assume you stayed long enough to see the last act of that play?"

"With the second Lovinett? Yeah. That was someone under Polyjuice, I take it? I can see now why you were on such a tight schedule..."

"Not that tight: I didn't send in the substitute until I had Lovinett in hand. No, I couldn't safely get Polyjuice Potion on such short notice... not and be sure Zabini's supporters wouldn't notice. No, that was..." Hermione cleared her throat and gave a nervous cough. "That was Ted. Lupin," she added.

Surprise flitted on his face before it went somber. He sat down on the bed and stared at Hermione. For a minute, he showed no reaction at all, and Hermione began to feel anxious. Finally, he asked, "So, uh... you and him?" He didn't elaborate, but Hermione understood what he meant.

With equal economy of words, she replied, "Better."

He nodded slowly. "Thank you," he said, and meant it. He said nothing more for another moment, before smiling slightly and changing the subject. "Well? Has Lovinett told us anything yet?"

"Not yet. First, we have to make sure his own memory hasn't been tampered with. Once we're satisfied about that, then we question him under Veritaserum. To be honest, I haven't much doubt what we'll learn, but unfortunately, my certainty isn't the same as legal proof. I was right about how Lovinett smuggled a wand into Swivingham's cell, though." She gave him a broad smile that was as good as a taunt.

"Um. All right, I'll bite: how?"

"He didn't," she told him triumphantly.

Harry waited another moment, then let out a long-suffering sigh.
"You're evil, Hermione."

"Why, thank you, Harry. Let me put it this way: he did it the same way Hagrid brought a wand into Hogwarts, to engorge the Hallowe'en pumpkins every year."

"But Hagrid hasn't got a wand. Oh, well, he did once, but it was snapped when they kicked him out of school as a kid. 'Course, he still kept the pieces..." Harry stopped and raised an eyebrow at Hermione. "Inside his umbrella."

"Yes! Yes! I was so obsessed with how Lovinett could have smuggled a wand in his briefcase – when what he actually smuggling was his briefcase! The handle has a wand core, like Hagrid's umbrella!"

"Which I assume you tested with Priori Incantatem, or you wouldn't be so happy about it. Very clever, Hermione." Harry applauded noiselessly, grinning. "Does this mean you can arrest Zabini before the Conference starts tomorrow?"

"Not quite yet. We still need Lovinett's verbal testimony – confession – call it what you will, but he has to implicate Zabini before we can move against him. Of course, once that's done, tying him in with the Cartel Lords should be straightforward – the little polecat'll probably turn Crown's Evidence himself." Hermione smiled and opened her briefcase. "So while I'm waiting, I thought I'd indulge in a little light reading."

"Light reading?" Harry craned his neck to see what she held. "Oh Merlin, more ancient runes?"

"Croaker gave me this, a couple of days ago," she explained. "He told me that the runes on the Arch have changed since our last visit. I simply haven't had a chance to think about it before now." She unfolded the parchment and looked it over in silence for a minute.

"Yes," she said eventually, showing him the parchment. "See here, and here?" She pointed to two runes, not to be found in the classic futhark. One was the bisected circle inside a triangle, the symbol of the Deathly Hallows. The other was an ovoid with a long curled tail, like a misshapen letter Q. "That seems to be the symbol for Voldemort... well, I suppose it does look like a stylized Dark Mark. But these gaps in the sequence appear to be new... and there are a couple of new runes included, as well. Hm."

Harry waited without saying anything, but with mounting impatience. Finally, Hermione refolded the parchment. "A warning against something, but I can't see what. The gaps make it harder to interpret. In any case, I certainly won't be able to finish translating it tonight. I'm sorry, Harry... I'm sure it's something to do with that barrier across the doorway..."

"Don't fret yourself, Hermione. I mean, with the Conference tomorrow, your first priority is Zabini." He shrugged and smiled. "I've kept the Hallows for fifteen years – a day or two more won't make any difference."

"I can't help worrying. I worry one day will make a difference. I worry about what the Hallows are doing to you." She sat on the bed next to him and looked him in the face. "I mean, it's all been so gradual, you might not notice any new effects until it was too late. After all, we know the Cloak has tampered with your emotions, and the Stone's made you sensitive to Death currents... when would the Wand start affecting you, too?"

In the instant before Harry's face went perfectly blank, she saw the flash of guilt – and she knew. "Oh, for the love of...! Harry James Potter! Why don't you tell me these things! How else am I supposed to help you?"

"But it's nothing, honest! I didn't want to trouble you over something trivial, when you've got so much to worry about already!"

Hermione folded her arms across her chest and glared at him, with equal parts incredulity and fury. It seemed to loosen his tongue, a bit. "It's just, well, I've noticed I'm not sleeping as much as I used to. I'm not tired," he hastened to add, "not a bit. I just don't sleep as much."

"Uh huh. How many hours of sleep do you get a night?" Hermione demanded. She saw him about to prevaricate, and added, "On average, Harry. Roughly."

"Erm, well... roughly, on average..." Harry coughed and looked away. "Zero," he mumbled.

She was shocked out of her anger... but only partially, and only for a moment. "And you thought that was trivial! Don't you see what's happening? Not needing to feel, not needing to sleep... soon, you'd probably stop needing to eat. The Hallows are drawing you into the Nether World, Harry, one step at a time!"

"But, no, they wouldn't be able to do that. I mean, look at the Story of the Three Brothers – none of them were sucked into the Nether World. The Hallows have never affected anyone like that before..."

"No one's ever been the Master of all three Hallows before! Harry, this settles it – you have to get rid of the Hallows!"

He looked at her helplessly, almost despairingly. "You think I don't know that? I'm open to suggestions."

Hermione quickly went through the possibilities in her head. The Hallows couldn't be destroyed by any magic she could conjure: even magic potent enough to destroy a Horcrux had left the Resurrection Stone almost unscathed. The best option was still returning the Hallows to their maker... but how? Necromantic rituals, she was sure, wouldn't work in this case: using death magic against Death wasn't the brightest of ideas. There was the cave in Greece, which legend said led to the Nether World, but it might not exist... might not be readily found if it did exist... and might even have the same barrier across it as the Death Chamber in the Department of Mysteries. As for other portals to the afterlife, none were familiar

enough for Hermione to suggest them without more research – and she was now convinced Harry was running out of time.

"We haven't much choice," she said after a minute. "We'll have to go back to the Department of Mysteries. There must be some way to get through the barrier, there must!"

Harry shrugged. "Don't suppose anyone's tried using a house elf to get in... I've never forgotten how the elves can Apparate to Hogwarts when humans can't." He raised a quick hand to forestall her response. "I know, I know, they have a different sort of magic altogether. That's what I mean: maybe an elf can get in. 'Course, with the runes changing..." He hesitated.

"With the runes changing into a warning," Hermione finished his thought for him, "an elf would probably be risking his life if he actually got inside. And," she added, interpreting his unhappy look, "you don't want to endanger any more lives, even elfin lives."

"No... it'd sorta defeat the whole purpose of getting rid of the Hallows, wouldn't it?" Harry sighed dejectedly and ran his fingers through his hair. He leaned forward as he tried to think, elbows on knees and head in his hands. "Maybe, if the barrier's only across the door... I could break through the wall, or down through the ceiling from the floor above? But people would be sure to notice..."

"They might not notice if they were distracted by something else," she suggested. "Like the opening of a very attention-grabbing International Conference, say."

Harry turned his head slightly to look at her out of the corner of his eye. "Especially if the Wizengamot's top gun marched in to arrest the Conference chairman," he said after a moment. "Try to make it dramatic, would you?"

"Of course," Hermione replied gravely. "I'll bring a half-dozen Aurors with me, in matching Hussar uniforms."

"Carrying halberds," he agreed, equally straight-faced. "They stand at the door in two files."

"My honor guard, of course, so naturally they'll precede me. And then I enter the Conference hall, riding my magnificent white stallion."

"Hey, I asked for drama, not fantasy... No, you'll come striding into the hall in your form-fitting leathers, with a billowing cape and bearing Gryffindor's sword. You'll stop in the center of the hall, commanding everyone's attention, and point the sword at Blaise Zabini, crying..."

"J'accuse!" they said in chorus. Hermione struck a theatrically heroic pose and pointed her finger imperiously.

Harry's straight face twitched as he tried to contain his amusement. Hermione saw the twitch, and couldn't suppress a tiny snort of laughter. Within seconds, both of them had burst out laughing. The release of the tensions of the day caused the laughter to redouble on itself – and seeing the other one helpless with laughter caused each of them to laugh all the harder.

By the time their paroxysms of mirth had been spent, Hermione was sprawled back on the bed, helpless with hiccups, while Harry lay curled on the floor holding his sides. "N-no f-fair," Harry eventually managed to say. "You caught me off guard. I'm not used to laughing like that..."

"Me hic! Me either," she said, wiping her eyes. "Are we pathetic, or what?"

He'd struggled to his knees, and now rested his arms on the bed. It brought his head level with her own. Harry started to say something, then paused in the midst of the first word. He was looking Hermione right in the face, and though she could tell he was trying not to show any reaction, he was clearly looking at her in... well, the only word was wonder.

"Yeah," he finally said, his voice gentle, soft, caressing, "pathetic, that's us."

He cleared his throat hoarsely, and got to his feet. Harry smiled – a bit uncertain, it seemed to her – and glanced at the bathroom door. "Er, I can change into my pajamas in there, give you some privacy..."

"Let me use the loo first," she said quickly, rolling off the bed and onto her feet. Hermione flung open the wardrobe, snatched her own pajamas from the bottom, and hurried to the bathroom. She locked the door behind her and turned on the faucet. But she didn't immediate wash her face, or brush her teeth, as she normally would. She looked at herself in the mirror instead.

You saw it, didn't you? Hermione asked her reflection.

Oh, yes indeed, her reflection replied, he was looking at you. With that look. We know what that look means, don't we?

It means he's actually seeing me as a desirable woman, instead of a non-male best friend. She quickly splashed water on her face, then patted it dry with a towel. Which would have been wonderful – fifteen years ago. Before I swore unbreakable marriage vows. There's not much I can do about it now.

Her reflection raised one scornful eyebrow. Oh, so now we're the Witch Who Gave Up, are we?

Hermione scowled at her reflection; its scorn continued unabated. Fine. We'll just see about that.

Quickly she brushed her teeth, finished her nightly ablutions, and shucked out of her clothes. She hesitated only a second before she put on her pajamas – only her pajamas. When she emerged from the bathroom, Harry was standing at the door holding the pajamas he'd brought from the Clayman flat. She gave him an encouraging smile as they moved past each other... and if she misjudged the distance between them and lightly brushed against him as they passed, it didn't seem to bother him.

When Harry returned to the bedroom, the lights were out... but the moon shone through the window, giving enough light to allow him to navigate the room. Hermione was already in bed, eyes closed. He was moving to the corner of the floor where his pillows and coverlet were stored, when she spoke: "I'm sure you'd be more comfortable up here."

"Um, yeah," he mumbled, "comfortable," in a tone suggesting he'd be anything but. She smiled without opening her eyes, and waited.

"It's just..." he started again, and hesitated, at a sudden loss for words. "Sharing a bed? Isn't that, um, not allowed?"

"It wouldn't be allowed," she agreed, "if we had sex in bed. But a snuggle... well, that's just a horizontal hug. We'll simply need to be careful with our hands." Hermione didn't know exactly how her magic would enforce her marriage vows if she or Harry attempted anything more overt – obviously, she had no practical experience on the matter! – but the possibilities, especially when it came to Harry, were too horrible to tempt.

She sneaked a peek through half-closed eyes. Harry wasn't moving, which meant he wasn't moving away. She pulled back the duvet from the unoccupied half of the bed, in open invitation.

Which he accepted.

Harry slid under the coverlet, settled himself, and turned his head to look at Hermione's face. Her eyes were fully open now, reflecting the bright moonlight, and her smile was tender, warm, and very warming. She placed her hand on his shoulder – and shoved.

He took the hint and rolled onto his side, facing away from her. She moved closer, snuggling up behind him, pressing herself against his back. Involuntarily, he tensed as she put one arm around his waist, carefully resting her hand on his chest.

"Is this all right?" Hermione asked softly. "Do you think you can try to sleep?"

"It's all right," Harry replied, tacitly sidestepping the issue of sleep. He was acutely aware of her breasts pressed against his back – and the fact that she wore no bra under her pajamas. Those pajamas might be long-sleeved and opaque, but their silken fabric transmitted sensation all too exquisitely.

"Relax," she urged. "This surely isn't the first time a woman's held you in her bed." There was a hint of interrogative in her voice... rather a strong hint, actually. He ignored her unspoken question, as he had at breakfast on Sunday, but he did seem to relax somewhat. Hermione pressed herself closer, smiled blissfully, and closed her eyes for slumber.

With Harry in her arms.

XXII: Declarations and Discoveries

The rhythm of Hermione's breathing, the warmth of her body at his back, the sheltering darkness of the room, should have lulled Harry into sleep, if anything could.

Evidently, even those weren't enough.

It was sometime after midnight, he guessed. He was keeping very still, so as to not disturb the sleeping woman whose arm was draped over him. Harry had been playing a sort of game, drawing on what he'd learned about wild magic through his mastery of the Elder Wand: eyes closed, he tried to sense the flow of magic through Hermione's body, gently in and out, like breathing. He wondered if it was something all wizards and witches did while they slept. Harry wouldn't know.

After all, this was the first time since mastering the Wand that he'd slept with someone magical. A witch, to boot. A beautiful witch. A brilliant witch.

A witch, he'd come to realize just hours before, whom he loved very, very much.

He didn't know why it should have been such a surprise, when he did realize it. Beauty, brains, and loyalty. How extraordinarily lucky he was to have found all three – in her. How incredibly blind he'd been not to have seen them in her years before. And what kind of fool would he have to be, to risk losing her now.

Even though, strictly speaking, she wasn't his to lose. No matter: he would find a way to be with her. Notwithstanding that he still had to remain isolated from the wizarding world... or that they could never share affection more physical than a hug or a chaste kiss... that their time together might be a series of exquisitely uncomfortable nights, like tonight. No matter.

I love Hermione. The rest... the rest is noise.

Harry's reverie was broken abruptly by a needle-like prickling at the base of his skull. Carefully he shifted, trying to move without awakening Hermione. He froze when he felt her arm tighten. "What

is it?" she whispered... as much to tell him she was awake, judging by her tone, as to gain information.

"Someone's trying to breach the wards," Harry replied. Now that he knew she was awake, he moved more decisively: sitting up in bed, he slipped the Elder Wand out from its bindings on his left forearm. He held it at the ready, its tip faintly glowing in the darkness, and cocked his head as though listening – probing.

Almost immediately, he lowered his wand. "They're gone. Whoever it was, they didn't want to hang around: one try at the wards, quick but hard, then they left. Afraid they might be caught if they stayed in one place, I suppose." He smiled grimly as he slid the Elder Wand back into its sheath. "And they'd be right."

"I'm surprised it's taken them so long to come for me," Hermione said quietly.

He shrugged. "There've been more subtle probes against the outer layer all week," he admitted. "Made to look accidental, like brushes of random magic. I didn't pay them any mind. This, though... this was the first concerted effort. Gee, it's almost like they're afraid you're about to catch them or something."

"Imagine that." There was dry humor in her voice. She started to settle back into the mattress, then paused as he failed to follow her.

"Lumos," he said, and soft light gathered around them. "Um, Hermione, this may be a good time to give you your birthday present." He saw her blink in confusion, and added, "Well, technically, it is your birthday."

"I thought you were going to cook me dinner?" Hermione sat up next to him, as always waking up promptly.

"I was... am. And I was going to give you this with the pudding – but now I think you should have it right away." A silent Accio brought the gift box to his waiting hand. Harry handed it to her with a slight flourish. "Happy Birthday, Hermione."

Hermione carefully unwrapped her gift without tearing the paper. That, at least, hasn't changed, thought Harry in amusement. The paper came away to reveal a long, flat velvet box – very obviously a

jewellery box. She flipped the cover open, and gasped. Inside was a necklace, comprising a solitary star sapphire as large as her thumb, set in ornate silver and hanging from a simple silver chain.

"You like sapphire, right?" Harry asked, a bit anxiously. "I mean, you always favored blue, and it's your birthstone and all..."

"It's lovely, Harry! Thank you!" She flung her arms around his neck and hugged him tightly. He put his arms around in return, and they embraced for a long minute.

When they broke apart, Harry took the box from her hands. "I'd like you to wear it now," he said, extracting the necklace from its box.

"Now? You mean, tonight?"

"And tomorrow, and the next day," he said, hesitant to break her happy mood with the explanation. "See, I've been worried about you, the last few days – so while I was keeping an eye on Ginny while she did her party preparations, I was working on this too. I charmed the stone to act as a... well, as an anchor point for my special wards, the ones I put on your house. When you wear this, you'll be as protected as you'd be here in Enthalpy House."

"Ah," Hermione murmured. "I see. And our anonymous would-be intruder just now... he reminded you of this? You think he's a harbinger, and that I might need this extra protection?"

He nodded. She didn't seem displeased by his concern, thank Merlin; she made no protest about how she could protect herself, as he'd half-expected. Instead, she put her hands behind her head and lifted her hair off her neck. It was a clear suggestion that he fasten the necklace's chain around her neck.

Which he lost no time in doing. Harry leaned towards her as his hands fumbled behind her neck... his cheek brushed hers, ever so delicately, and he had to suppress a shiver as the warmth of her skin touched his.

Hermione looked down at the star sapphire nestled just above her breasts. She lifted it, bringing it closer to her face so that she could examine it more closely. "Harry... did you personalize this in some

other way? Because I know it sounds odd, but I could swear I feel... well, you, your presence, here in the jewel."

"Really?" he said, slightly surprised. He took the jewel from her fingers, the chain still around her neck, and peered at it. "Huh... I assure you it wasn't intentional. Something to do with when I keyed you to the wards, a few days ago?" Smiling gently at her, he gave the stone a quick kiss before handing it back to her. "Happy accident, I guess."

She let the sapphire fall into place against her chest as she nodded to him in thanks. Protectively, she covered the gem with her hand, pressing it to her – then went wide-eyed in surprise. "I felt that!" she exclaimed, touching the point where the sapphire lay. "Your kiss – I felt it here!" A smile spread over Hermione's face: clearly, she was seeing possibilities open with this new discovery. She raised the jewel again and offered it to him.

It took Harry a moment to catch on. When he did, his smile matched hers. It's not quite the same as kissing her myself, but a piece of sapphire's not likely to run up against her vows. He took the jewel in his fingers and gave it another kiss... a softer kiss, more tender than his first quick peck. He returned the sapphire to her...

...and watched, gobsmacked, as she loosened a button on her pajama top, slipped the sapphire inside and pressed it to her left nipple. She sucked in a deep breath, then released it slowly as her face melted into a happy smile.

"Um... ummm..." Speechless, he watched as Hermione withdrew the jewel, leaving her top unbuttoned. Harry couldn't have pulled his eyes away from her even if Voldemort and Grindelwald together had reincarnated at that moment and begun singing Ode to a Hippogriff in two-part harmony.

"Another?" Her smile now impish, Hermione offered him the sapphire again.

"I... uh, I..." he sputtered.

"Biiiiirthdaaay," she sang.

Somehow, he managed to reassemble his wits. "Birthday. Your birthday. Right. But only once more. We... we have a lot to do tomorrow." She nodded in agreement.

Harry took the sapphire in his fingers, looked it over carefully... still puzzled how he could've imbued the stone with such an oddly personal affect. Deciding it was a problem for another day, he brought the stone to his lips. He closed his eyes, imagined himself kissing Hermione – as he now wanted to kiss her – and gave that kiss to the sapphire: a slow, lingering, sensual kiss. If it was to be the last one that evening, he wanted to make it count.

He released the stone to let it dangle from its chain in her hands. Harry was a little surprised to be the one drawing the line with Hermione like this – traditionally, that had been her role! – but it was the right thing to do, he felt. One more birthday "kiss", as it were, for the night... though he would happily have given her a thousand, if he'd been free to do so...

Hermione watched the sapphire swing from its chain for a moment, as though hypnotized. Then, with that impish grin, she drew the necklace over her head, freeing the gem. Meeting Harry's gaze boldly, she hooked a thumb around her elastic waistband, pulled it from her body, and thrust the gem into her pajama bottoms and between her legs.

With a flaming crimson face and an inarticulate gurgle, Harry clamped his eyes shut and rolled away from Hermione. The very thought of what Hermione was doing was enough to cause his loins to ache... and her deep, throbbing, just-shy-of-orgasmic moan didn't help matters at all. Not. At. All.

He felt, rather than saw, her arm snake around his torso again – he opened his eyes a crack to see the star sapphire beseeching another kiss. "Nox," he managed to croak, and blessed darkness descended to hide his red face.

"Oh, dear," came Hermione's voice, gentle and contrite. "I'm sorry, Harry, I was just playing. I didn't mean anything... that is, I assumed you were familiar with this sort of teasing, that you'd be comfortable with it..."

"Given my vast experience with women?" he asked tiredly. "Hermione, you've been dropping hints about my love life for a week now. Is it that important?" To you, he didn't add, but the words were clear in his tone.

Her hand withdrew from his torso. After a moment, it began to stroke his upper arm, trying to reassure him. She no longer held the sapphire... presumably she'd dropped it somewhere behind her where it wouldn't bother him further.

"Your private life is none of anybody else's business," she said hesitantly after a moment. "But... when it comes to us..."

His heart leapt at her use of the word us. And though he didn't interrupt her, something must have shown in his body language. "When it comes to us," she repeated with more confidence, "well, there are limits to how, er, demonstrative we can be with each other. My stupid, stupid vows make certain of that. But..." Hermione's voice faltered an instant, then continued, "but you have no limits on you, Harry. I'm sure, over the years, there were times you... that is, I know men have needs, and I understand, Harry..."

"Um... Hermione? Do you really think I'm desperately in need of going out and picking up some bimbo for a one-night shag?" Thankful as he was for the darkness hiding his face, Harry wished for that moment that there was enough light to see Hermione's face.

"Well, no, I'm certainly not suggesting you go out and..."

"I mean, I'm pretty sure that's the sort of carte blanche Ron wishes he was able to have." Oh, to blazes with caution, Harry decided, and rolled over until he was facing Hermione. He could make out her shape, but not her expression... which was probably just as well. It would have been nice to see what she was thinking, but that would have made it impossible for him to continue this discussion. "Granting permission implies I need it."

Hermione was silent for a few seconds. "Perhaps I assumed..." she began stiffly.

"Well, yes," Harry interrupted, before she could work herself into a snit. "Justifiably, I think, but yes. So let's not make assumptions." His

hand reached out to find hers. "Let me say it right out. Y'see, I'm very dense in a lot of ways, but I did realize something last night."

"Oh?" Her voice was no longer stiff – if anything, it was a little breathless.

"Uh huh. I realized that I am in love with one Hermione J. Granger. Who's been my best friend since I was eleven. Who's stayed true, even when I abandoned her – and who thwapped me repeatedly until I saw the light." He brought her hand to his lips and kissed it tenderly. "No matter how much it hurt."

"Ah." She made no move to draw closer to him... but she made no attempt to pull her hand away, either.

"So even though circumstances have arranged that I can't rip off her clothes and make passionate love to her, I think she does indeed have the right to grant me permission to play the field." He pressed her hand to his mouth again, not to kiss it, but so that she could feel his grin. "Which I have no intention of using."

Of all the responses she might have given, Harry didn't expect her to start sniffling.

Oh crap, I've bollixed it up again. Again! What did I say wrong? Hastily he put out his other hand, found her face, felt the wetness of tears. "No! Hermione, I'm..."

"Don't you dare apologize, Harry Potter!" she scolded him through her tears. "I'm crying because I'm happy, dammit!"

"Ah... right. Of course you are." Harry released her hand so that he could stretch his arms around her. They ended up with her head against his chest and his chin atop her head. Harry was careful to cant his lower body slightly away from her; certain parts of his anatomy didn't need any more encouragement.

Her exasperated snort, so characteristically Hermione, told him she knew perfectly well what he was doing. She seemed to be steeling herself to continue, determined to get the words out before her nerve failed her. "But I'm serious, Harry. Just because I can't engage in sex doesn't mean you can't... or, or shouldn't. I won't think the less of you if you, er, pursue other venues."

Harry didn't immediately reply. He'd been extremely reluctant to share his sexual experiences with her... but he saw now that nothing less would reassure her. "Twice," he finally said, almost inaudibly.

"Twice?" she repeated, puzzled, before she realized what he was talking about. "Oh! Twice. But... you mean, in fifteen...?" Hermione paused a second, then nodded, accepting the information. "All right. Once with Ginny, and..."

"No," he interrupted harshly. "What made you think Ginny and I did it?"

"She... ah. I see. She allowed us to assume that." Hermione fell silent; Harry could sense she was straining not to ask questions. Not quite what I expected, considering the interrogation I got after my first kiss with Cho. Well, we've all grown...

"It was a day seminar – hosted by Le Cordon Bleu." His voice was low again, slow and measured... confessorial. "I met her at lunch, and we seemed to hit it off... so we met again at dinner, and then in her hotel room. She was a bit older than me, more experienced. She expected me to be more experienced, too. When it became clear I didn't much know what I was doing, she..."

Hermione waited for him to continue. "She?" she prompted.

He hadn't realized how much it still hurt. "She laughed."

She nodded, but didn't say anything. When it became clear she wouldn't say anything, Harry felt a surge of gratitude such as he'd seldom felt before. He tried to joke past his hurt. "I was about ready to become a monk after that."

He broke off. Hermione nodded again... he realized it was her way of showing she was listening, of encouraging him. "Then a few years later," he continued, "one of the waitresses at the Idée Fixe set me up with her younger sister. Uni student, bright and fresh, no expectations. We got along pretty well, really."

Again he broke off, and she couldn't contain herself. "And?"

Harry shrugged. "And she was a Muggle, and I was a wizard, and I was living under a false identity to boot. I couldn't share my life with her, couldn't share my self. The excuses just kept getting clumsier and clumsier... Anyway, after a few months she got a scholarship to some American school, and we both considered it time to end the relationship."

"Oh, Harry. I'm sorry..."

"It's okay." Gently he began to stroke her hair, as he had several evenings earlier... reasoning that if the magic of her vows permitted it then, it should permit it now. Of course, then he'd only thought he "cared for" her. He hadn't yet figured out that he loved her.

Which, of course, shows how much of an idiot I've been.

"It's okay," he repeated. "I can now say that I've known sex, and I've known love – and of the two, I much prefer love."

"A sentiment with which I totally agree. Frustrating though it may be," Hermione murmured, resting her head against his chest. He continued to stroke her hair... his hand didn't seem able to stop. "Do you know," she continued after a pause, "there've been times when I had to hug my pillow like this – I thought, because I needed physical contact so much. But then, I could've had physical contact any time I wanted... if I were willing to put up with Ron. I needed you, Harry." She snuggled closer. "And you're much better than a pillow, I must say."

Harry sighed slightly, and she immediately picked up his thought. "I know we can't do this every night. It is frustrating... and if we keep tempting my vows' magic, sooner or later we'll be burned. But if... if we could just do this, every now and then..."

"Happy Birthday, Hermione," he said softly.

Her breathing lengthened... she was growing sleepy again. "And for the record, Mr. Potter," she mumbled to his heart, "I love you too."

He nodded, ever so slightly, as though to say I know. His patient hair-stroking didn't stop. When a gentle snore issued forth, Harry smiled to himself. One hand continued to stroke the bushy mane of

hair... the other felt around on the mattress behind her until it found the star sapphire necklace.

One last birthday kiss, as much for him as for her – to be a surprise, when she discovered it – and he dropped the gem back onto the mattress.

Hermione awoke again, just before dawn, to the distant sound of someone calling her name. She came to full alert almost immediately, and turned her head to greet Harry.

Only to discover that Harry had rolled over onto his side again, facing away from her.

"Um, good morning," she greeted him. "Did you hear something...?"

He tilted his head without rolling back. "Hear...?" He was interrupted by someone calling Hermione's name again. "It sounds like it's from your Floo fireplace."

"It sounds like Dennis Creevey!" Hermione was instantly out of bed and throwing on a robe. She strode to the door, and paused as she canceled the security charms on it. "I'd better talk to him," she said, looking over her shoulder, "a call this early can't be good news. Do you..." She quickly turned her head again to face the door, but not before she'd seen why Harry had rolled away from her during the night. A morning riser in more ways than one, she thought with amusement. I wonder if sleeping in the Cloak was damping that reaction, as well as other emotions. Probably, judging by his embarrassment now.

"You're already keyed to the wards," Harry said hastily. "I'll just, um, make myself scarce."

"Can you wait for me in my rooms at the Ministry? I want to coordinate our efforts today – see if we can get you to the Arch while everyone's busy with the Conference." Barely waiting for Harry's agreement, Hermione flung open the door and rushed to the fireplace. "I'm here, Dennis," she told the flames, kneeling before them.

Dennis's head appeared. "Hermione, we have bad news here. Peasegood and the Legilimens have spent all night checking Lovinett's memory..."

"Don't tell me his memory's been Obliviated?"

"Not quite. His memory's been sequestered. Peasegood says there's a set of memories that's been blocked, walled away by an outside Occlumens. Lovinett himself can't access those memories without someone telling him a code word. And if we try to access them, there's a failsafe in place that will wipe Lovinett's mind. Maybe completely, according to Peasegood."

"Damn!" Hermione pounded the floor with her fist in frustration. "Does Peasegood have any ideas for how to get past the blocks?"

Dennis wagged his head. "He wants to keep working at it – I assume he wouldn't do that unless he had some hope. But if he guesses wrong, Lovinett ends up in Vegetable City."

Hermione remained motionless for a moment, thinking frantically. "These... mental blocks," she said slowly, "these blocks surely wouldn't have been put in place without Lovinett's knowledge or permission. His conscious memories might match the story he tells, but he must be aware those memories are false. Play on that, Dennis. Emphasize what we can prove: that his memories have been tampered with, and that he did cast the Imperius Curse on Swivingham. We can convict him of that, if nothing else, whether he remembers it or not!"

She jabbed a finger at Dennis as he nodded his understanding. "Maybe then he'll remember a few random details that weren't blocked – like, say, accepting a payment from our dear Mr. Zabini. Oh, and be sure to remind him that client-attorney privilege can't be invoked on an agreement he claims never happened!"

"Hermione – what are you doing?" Ginny had emerged from Rose's bedroom, ashen-faced and gaping.

"Wait one, Ginny," Hermione said, not taking her eyes off Dennis's face. "Dennis, you understand?"

Dennis grimly smiled. "Apply pressure until something crystallizes. Got it, boss. I'll contact you at the Ministry the moment we have anything." With a swirl of green flame, his head disappeared from the Floo.

Hermione barely had time to get off his knees and to her feet when Ginny was in front of her. "What is this? Did I hear you say something about Blaise? Hermione, I thought we decided he was innocent!"

"Ginny, you showed up here Monday night because you were scared of Zabini! Remember? You were afraid, because you thought he might be involved in Swivingham's death!"

"I was overreacting! And besides, that was before you looked at my Pensieve memory. You said Blaise didn't have anything to do with it, based on what I saw!"

"No," sighed Hermione in exasperation, "that's what you said. I said a clever lawyer would argue that your memory didn't implicate Zabini. Not iron-clad, anyway." She started for her bedroom. "Look, I have to go straight to the Ministry, and I need to shower and dress..."

Ginny surprised Hermione by following her into the bedroom, still arguing. Hermione was relieved to not see Harry: either he was under the Cloak, or (more likely) he'd already Disapparated. Probably to Clayman's flat for his own shower and change of clothes, before meeting her in her office.

"If my memory can't implicate Blaise, it's because he's not involved! He'd have no reason to want Swivingham dead, anyway – the man was about to be sent to Azkaban, for Merlin's sake, which is punishment enough. You can't just go around and accuse a high-ranking Ministry official of ordering a murder, simply because you don't like him!"

Hermione whirled angrily to confront Ginny. "Is that what you think of me, Ginny Weasley? After over twenty years, do you really think so little of my integrity!"

Ginny flinched only slightly. "You just told Dennis that you wanted a connection with Blaise... I'm sorry, Hermione, but it does sound like you're trying to dig up dirt on him! You're almost as bad as Ron, you

won't even consider that he's reformed – that he's trying to make our world a better place!" She caught Hermione's gaze and held it. "Lay off him, won't you?" she pleaded softly.

Their gazes stayed locked for several moments. Hermione took that time to review everything Ginny might have seen or heard at Zabini Manor. Either she's the most accomplished liar and actress ever born, Hermione concluded, or she really doesn't know about the Cartel Lords.

"Ginny," Hermione finally said, "try to believe this, because I'll only say it once. If Blaise Zabini hasn't done anything illegal, I will never trump up charges against him just because I disagree with his politics." She saw Ginny begin to relax in satisfaction, and hardened her voice as she continued, "And if Blaise Zabini has done something illegal, I will never fail to bring charges against him just because you're sleeping with him."

Into Ginny's shocked silence, Hermione added, "Now, since you were planning on returning to your flat today, or possibly attending your Quidditch practice, perhaps you should get ready to leave, since I need to do likewise." She watched as Ginny backed away with something like a sob, and turned to her wardrobe to pull out the clothes she'd be wearing to the Ministry that day.

She heard Ginny stumble against the bookshelves on her way out of the bedroom. Hermione gave no more thought to her sister-in-law... but if she'd turned her head, she would have seen that Ginny had removed one of the books from the bookshelf as she left.

It wasn't a lie, Ginny told herself. I was worried about my safety when I showed up at Hermione's home, truly. But that's only because I'd panicked – Blaise would never hurt me, I'm far too useful to him. As I'm about to prove.

Extremely rare was the wizarding business that stayed open twenty-four hours a day. In that respect, the Muggle world was a hell of a lot more convenient. She waited now at the photography counter at an all-night pharmacy, as they developed her roll of ultra-sensitive high-speed film.

When Dad first brought that old gadget home, years ago, he didn't even know exactly what it was, Ginny recalled. I'm the one who

recognized it as a camera, and who took it to a Muggle shop... where they fixed it and told me what it was. And what it was, was perfect.

An old camera indeed, no larger than her two fingers together, but a precision optical instrument for that. Predating transistors, powered by a wound spring, virtually silent, it was made to go unnoticed by Muggles. The fact that it had no magic to be detected – and no electronics to be affected – made it equally unobtrusive in the wizarding world. Ginny had taken to carrying it everywhere with her, in her Extended overnight bag – just to Be Ready.

A quick Transfiguration in the midst of my party preparations – did Hermione think I didn't know about all the monitoring wards on her house? – and one of her books was able to hold my camera until I needed it. Last night. Snapping one picture of her bedroom every half hour until the roll of film ended.

One of those pictures should show the face of Hermione's lover.

Let's face it, Blaise is brilliant, but he's such a male. He can't see the most obvious things, sometimes. When he told me at our last Fire Party about the recent upswing in Hermione's mood – how she was being friendlier to Ministry workers, and they to her – he had no clue to the reason. Sweet Circe, once I arrived at Hermione's home, it was plain as day! Suddenly upbeat? Extra blankets and pillows? Bedroom door made Imperturbable every night? She's been getting laid!

I mean, if Ron could find a way around their marriage vows, Hermione certainly could.

As soon as I have the photos, I'll know who she's been shagging. And that might just be the lever I need to get her to drop this pointless investigation of Blaise. It's obvious she's trying to discredit him, before today's International Conference secures his position as heir apparent. After all, that's why I suggested to him that his department chair it.

No, I've been far too valuable to Blaise. And by the end of today, it will be clear to him, too, beyond doubt. I think I'll enjoy being the wife of the next Minister of Magic.

XXIII: A Page from Machiavelli

No, Ginny thought wildly, practically hyperventilating as she flipped through the photographs, it's not possible. It can't be. It can't. It CAN'T...

If Harry had been nervous being in her office late Tuesday night, when all other Ministry employees had left for the evening, he was three times as nervous being in her office early Thursday morning, with people already beginning to arrive for work – not to mention the bustle of preparation for an international Conference. Hermione had to repeatedly bring his attention back to the issue at hand. "Do no Ministry elves work in the Department of Mysteries, then?"

"Some do, Miss Hermione," answered Canby. His professional demeanor was actually quite remarkable, considering that he was in the same room with The Witch Who Won and The Defender of House-Elves. "But Mysterious elves don't associate with other Ministry elves. They are like Unspeakables that way."

"So no way of knowing whether they've been inside the Death Chamber since the barrier went up, then?" she pressed. Regretfully, Canby shook his head.

"Which means we're back to Plan B," said Harry. He wore the Stealth Cloak, with only his head uncovered – ready to vanish in an instant should a stranger approach. It was very odd, talking to a disembodied head, but Hermione refused to let it bother her. "We ignore the door, blast a hole through the wall and enter the Chamber that way."

Hermione nodded reluctantly. "The Conference is scheduled to convene at ten," she noted. "It'll take a few minutes for the speeches and all to be thoroughly underway. This being the opening session, I imagine some of the senior Unspeakables will attend – that should thin the ranks inside the Department, if only a little." Her eyes flicked to Canby. "Canby, you may be required to provide a distraction while Harry tries to get into the Chamber. Are you certain you're willing to, well, let the Ministry be damaged...?"

"Canby is paid by the Ministry," the elf replied proudly. "Canby works for the Wizengamot Senior Counsel. Canby does what Miss Hermione says."

She couldn't help smiling, even as she sighed and shook her head. Elves rarely gave their loyalty to an abstraction, like justice or the Ministry; she'd tried hard enough to appeal to that with Swivingham's "working elves", Brilli and the others, but with only limited success. No, their loyalty was intensely personal, as Dobby's had been to Harry. She ought to have known that Canby would attach himself to her.

I have to be careful not to take advantage of that, she reminded herself firmly.

"Right, then. We'll wait until after ten before we try anything. In the meantime..." Harry looked with some agitation at the closed door. "Is there some room where we could wait, that's a little less public? I really don't feel comfortable sitting here all exposed."

"You could pull up your hood and vanish in half a second, and no detection charm on the planet could find you," Hermione pointed out. "Still..." She gave Canby an inquiring look.

The elf briefly considered, then bobbed his head shyly. "There are elves' quarters, Miss Hermione. No wizard or witch ever goes there. None would see Mister Harry there."

"Except for the Ministry elves," said Harry, "and... I mean, I hate to say it, but Hermione seems to think that if they see me alive, I might, um, disrupt..." He glanced uncomfortably at Hermione, looking for help.

"Some private rooms were set aside for our witnesses, Mister Harry," Canby quickly added. "Brilli, Whimsy, and the others. They are already knowing about you. We will even make rooms larger for you, if you are wanting it!"

Harry smiled wanly. "I can always sit on the floor... anyway, it's only until, say, ten-thirty or so. Sounds good, then. Shall we?" He extended his hand to Canby, who stared at it for a moment in amazement.

Canby brought his gaze up to Harry's face, and squared his shoulders. "Mister Harry Potter," he said with dignity, "it would be Canby's honor." Solemnly he took Harry's hand.

Harry quickly looked over at Hermione. "You'll let me know if we hear from Dennis?" he asked quietly.

"I'll tell you as soon as he calls," she promised. Hermione had already summarized her Floo call from Dennis, earlier that morning; she'd also explained that, as their "really safe house" had no Floo connection of its own, they had to wait for Dennis to contact her again. "And in the meantime, I'll keep pursuing other possibilities. Thank you, Canby... and thank you, Harry." With a pop of air, Harry and Canby vanished from Hermione's rooms.

Hermione spent a few moments trying to devise alternative plans, should Dennis and his team prove unable to access Lovinett's sequestered memories. Some way to connect Zabini to Swivingham's murder – or to the Cartel that ordered it. Mm, Lucius Malfoy might have more information: Lovinett had been his attorney, after the First Voldemort War. Did Malfoy recommend Lovinett's services to the Cartel? Through Zabini, perhaps?

There were several avenues she could follow, but none that were certain to bear fruit quickly – and she needed to neutralize Zabini today, if possible. As the chairman of today's Conference, he'd use his influence to direct attention away from the Cartel, or send the various Ministries down blind alleys. Not to mention consolidate his personal power within Britain's own Ministry. Hermione was not going to let that happen.

But at the moment, she had very little idea how to stop him.

She flicked a glance at her wristwatch and groaned. The first delegates would be arriving for the blasted Conference now, through pre-arranged International Portkeys. And while Robards and Kerricks, as Heads of their Departments, would be present to greet the more important delegates, she felt sure that Blaise Zabini would be personally welcoming each new arrival. With a warm handshake and that charming smile. Dammit.

Standing, she straightened her robes and headed out the door towards the lifts. As she did, her hand paused on the star sapphire that rested just above her breasts – under her robes, where it wouldn't raise awkward questions. Hermione smiled as she remembered slipping the necklace over her head as she dressed

that morning. She strongly suspected that Harry had kissed the gem one last time during the night... and she was saving that stored kiss for when it would do the most good. During the lunch break, perhaps.

The lift took Hermione down to the Atrium level: large meeting halls had been opened off the Atrium, so that the visitors wouldn't need to take the lifts to the Conference. She stepped out of the lift as its doors opened – and froze in surprise.

Kingsley Shacklebolt was sitting in the Atrium, in a very handsome wheelchair that almost resembled a mobile throne. His face looked positively gaunt, but he was greeting newcomers with evident delight.

"Sergei! Welcome! I'm so pleased you could be here on such short notice. Well, yes, this is an important issue, one on which I feel our collective Ministries need to pool our resources. Your Enforcement people provided you with case files? Excellent." He turned his head and spotted Hermione. "Ah, Madam Granger! Sergei, have you met our Senior Counsel, Hermione Granger-Weasley? Madam Granger, Direktor Sergei Volshev."

"Zdravstvuite, gospodin," murmured Hermione, as Volshev sketched a hasty bow. She shook her head with a smile as he seemed about to address her. "And that, I'm afraid, exhausts my conversational Russian."

"A pity. Your pronunciation was refreshingly impeccable," he smiled in return. With a nod to Shacklebolt, Volshev wended his way through the growing crowd. Hermione watched him for a second before turning to Shacklebolt.

"If you're thinking about scolding me," he said, quickly and quietly, "don't. I had to come in today: some documents needed to be delivered to the Wizengamot – in person." He smiled coolly and added, slightly louder, "And moreover, this Conference was my idea in the first place. I wanted to at least be present for its opening." Shacklebolt seemed to be looking over Hermione's shoulder as he spoke. She turned slightly to see who was approaching this time.

Blaise Zabini stepped up to Shacklebolt's chair. "And it was good of you to come, sir," he said smoothly. "Thank you. Though I think Madam Granger will agree that you shouldn't exert yourself. Where is your nurse?"

"She'll be along presently... but I wanted to greet our arrivals on my own. Rest assured, Mr. Zabini, I'll leave the exhausting bits of the next two days to you," nodded the Minister. "I'll have my opening remarks, of course... perhaps I'll even look in on some of the sessions, as time permits." Watching them, Hermione had to suppress a smile of admiration: Kingsley's presence took the wind out of Zabini's sails quite effectively. No one could gainsay the Minister's right to preside over the Conference, and war-hero Kingsley Shacklebolt was perhaps the one person who could eclipse Zabini's rising star.

Did Kingsley know that Zabini would use the Conference to spotlight his candidacy? Kingsley had to've suspected it – he's nobody's fool. I still wish he hadn't come today, though: his health is all too precarious.

Hermione stepped back from Shacklebolt as he greeted another newcomer. Unexpectedly, Zabini likewise took a step away, to stand by Hermione's side. He regarded her with a neutral expression for a moment, before raising one eyebrow at her – much as a grandmaster might acknowledge his opponent across the chessboard. All he said, however, was, "Well, this should help keep the agenda on focus."

"I think it's sweet," came a new voice. Ginny Weasley, elegantly dressed, had appeared at Zabini's side. She squeezed his arm and smiled at him. "It's rather a touching gesture, Blaise dear, when you think about it. Passing on the torch to the next generation, and all that."

Zabini blinked at Ginny in surprise... then a calculating smile grew on his face. Hermione kept her own expression carefully schooled, to hide her sudden dismay. Ginny had just provided Zabini with the perfect spin for Shacklebolt's presence – if Zabini played it right, he might yet end the Conference with his political influence enhanced. It would all depend on how Shacklebolt played his part... and whether he had the physical strength to do it.

Ginny gave Zabini a quick kiss on the cheek, then turned to Hermione. "Can you spare me a few minutes, Hermione? Girl talk," she lightly added as an aside to Zabini. He laughed and waved them off.

"Let's go to your office," Ginny said in a lower voice. "Someplace where we can talk privately." Her emphasis on the last word raised the hairs on the back of Hermione's neck.

In silence they took the lift. In silence Hermione led the way to her office. In silence Ginny waited, but only until Hermione closed the door. "Do you still have my memory?" she demanded, before Hermione could speak.

"Your...? The memory we reviewed together in the Pensieve? Yes, of course." Hermione stepped to a short cabinet, opened it, and brought out the phial filled with silvery mist. She made a motion to hand it over, but stopped as Ginny raised her hand.

"Good," Ginny said. "Keep it."

Hermione regarded Ginny in surprise. She'd expected Ginny to insist on having her memory returned to her, so it couldn't be used against her precious Blaise. "You... want me to keep custody of it?"

Ginny gave her a curious half-smile, and gestured towards the chair behind Hermione's desk. As they seated themselves, the redhead seemed to be choosing her next words with some care.

"I think you've always had the gift – even back at Hogwarts – of accepting what your eyes told you," she began obliquely. "No matter how much you disliked the answer, you never shied from seeing it." Her mouth gave that quirk again. "Hermione... you saw Blaise just now. I think you've started to accept what your eyes are telling you: he's going to be our next Minister of Magic. But I know," she added quickly, forestalling Hermione's protest, "I know you have, well, reservations. You don't trust him – again, going back to our Hogwarts days. And you're worried that a Zabini Ministry might turn back the reforms you've made, under Kingsley Shacklebolt."

The speech had obviously been thought out in advance. Hermione found herself clamping her lips shut, waiting to see where Ginny's line of reasoning would lead.

"I suppose, if I were in your shoes, I might be worried too," Ginny said sympathetically. "I mean, I know that Blaise has the best interests of the wizarding world at heart, and that he'd try to do right

by everyone, including the Muggleborn. But you've no way of knowing that. And you're scared of what he might do when he's in power."

"You could say that, yes," said Hermione neutrally.

"And that's exactly why I want you to keep my memory. It's not proof of anything criminal – even you admitted that it wouldn't stand up in court – but Blaise would probably find it embarrassing. And the Minister of Magic can't afford embarrassments like that. So with that memory, you've got a handle on Blaise. What's the term, 'checks and balances'? That memory gives you a way to check Blaise, if you feel he's going too far over the line. Which should give you some reassurance – enough to let you accept him as Minister, d'you think?" Ginny sat back in her chair and waited for Hermione to respond.

"So," Hermione said slowly, "you're telling me I shouldn't object to Zabini becoming Minister... because I have this threat to hold over his head. But the threat's no good if he doesn't know it exists..."

"On the contrary," Ginny corrected her, "if he knew it existed, you might worry he'd start a PR campaign to soften its impact. No, keep it safe, for the day you think he's about to cross the line – trying to disenfranchise the goblins again, or something. Then tell him you have it – show it to him in a Pensieve. It's as I said, a Minister can't afford a scandal. He'll give way to you."

"I don't understand, Ginny. Even stipulating Zabini does become Minister – why are you undermining his position? I thought you wanted him to..."

"I'm not undermining him, really," Ginny said, and that half-smile had come back to her face. "Since I know you won't actually use this threat, except for something really important – important enough to risk scandal, I mean." She reached into an inner pocket of her robes and brought out a set of photographs. "Checks and balances, remember?" she added.

She leaned forward and spread the photos on the desk in front of Hermione, who picked one up and stared at it. It was a bit grainy, taken in poor light, but it very clearly showed Hermione in her bed – with Harry.

"My dear brother's not made much of a secret of your marital woes," Ginny said, with an apologetic grimace. "I mean, personally, I can hardly blame you for taking a lover – but you can't afford a scandal any more than Blaise could. And since everyone knows about your vows, they'll also know that you couldn't evade them without trying extra-hard. This couldn't be an impulsive, one-night-stand sort of affair."

Hermione dropped the photo and picked up another. Like all of them, it was a Muggle photo: the figures in it didn't move. However, unlike the others, it showed a well-lit scene: Harry and Hermione sitting in bed, their arms wrapped tightly around one another. He must have just given me my birthday present, she thought dazedly.

Ginny evidently expected Hermione to say something at this point. When nothing was forthcoming, she resumed, "And as I said, I can hardly blame you. Especially since you've found a lover who looks so much like Harry." That got Hermione's attention, Ginny saw. "I'm guessing this is your Harry stand-in – the one you used to convince Swivingham's house-elves to testify. Blaise would be surprised, I think, to learn he exists... he still thinks you invented that rumor out of thin air." Ginny shrugged. "But it stands to reason, if the rumor alone didn't convince the elves, you'd have something tangible to show them – some-one, I should say. And I admit, the resemblance is striking – even I was taken aback for a moment."

Her voice lowered to a purr as she concluded, "But I think it's safe to say that I know what Harry looked like in bed." Her smirk was both knowing and dismissive.

Ginny watched as Hermione let the photo fall from her fingers back onto the desktop. Her eyes stared, unfocused, at the images strewn before her. Ginny waited another moment, then spoke again in a more conciliatory tone. "I... I didn't want things to get to this point, Hermione, honest. I tried, remember? I tried to convince you to lay off Blaise. But really, it's better this way. Blaise will be Minister, and you'll have your job... and, well, will anything have changed? If Blaise ever does break the law, you can still go after him. All this means," and she gestured at the photos, "is that you won't rush into anything that would make a stink. And since you've got my memory, it'll keep Blaise from doing the same."

She sat back in her chair, confident that her position was ironclad. Hermione was a pragmatist – she couldn't have reached her current position without recognizing certain political realities – and she'd accept Ginny's proposal. Why, it wasn't even fair to call it a "threat", really, since both Blaise and Hermione were checked... checks and balances, that's all it was...

"I... I..." Hermione seemed to be finding her voice at last. "I... don't know what to say..."

Holding back her triumphant smile, Ginny opened her mouth to respond... only to leave it gaping as Hermione rose to her feet, her face devoid of emotion.

"Except what the Duke of Wellington once said," Hermione continued more firmly. She planted her hands on the desktop and leaned forward, never taking her eyes off Ginny. Those brown eyes flared with sudden wrath as she finished speaking, in a voice gone deadly quiet, anger expressed in precise diction: "Publish and be damned, Weasley."

For one long moment, the room was utterly still. Without conscious intent, Ginny found herself no longer sitting – but on her feet, backing slowly away from the cold rage that was The Witch Who Won. She tried to speak, but only a humiliating squeak emerged.

Hermione hadn't yet moved, but her furious glare hadn't left Ginny's face. It came to Ginny, quite clearly, that the only thing saving her from a great many excruciating, debilitating hexes was Hermione's self-restraint – which was fast crumbling. Hastily, Ginny reached behind her for the doorknob, fumbled the door open, and in a rush had escaped the room with the door closed behind her.

Not until Ginny was gone did Hermione give way to a fit of furious tremors. She collapsed back into her seat and raised her fists before her, as though trying to throttle her anger – or possibly her sister-in-law. I took her in! When she thought her life was in danger, I took her into my home! And she could do this to me in return? And look me in the eye and claim it was For The Greater Effing GOOD?

One finger at a time, she unclenched her fists, and breathed deeply to try and purge the fury from her system. The red haze that had filled her vision was slowly dissolving. After a moment, Hermione

had recovered enough to let her gaze skip randomly around the room. It came to rest on the photos, still spread over the desk, showing Harry and her in various stages of cuddling or sleep. She never slept with Harry, she thought, tartly and somewhat irrelevantly, she has no idea what he looks like in bed!

Still, she realized as she calmed, Ginny ought to've recognized Harry, regardless. Did Harry's wards on Enthalpy House affect how others might see these pictures, perhaps? Or... no, it couldn't be that ridiculous.

Sure it could, another voice in her head interjected. Ginny hasn't matured – why should her image of Harry mature? Subconsciously, she expected him to still be eighteen years old.

Hermione couldn't help snorting, in combined amusement and disdain. Yes, Ginny, I'm perfectly capable of accepting the evidence of my own eyes. You should consider trying it sometime.

She held one hand in front of her. It no longer trembled, nor seemed ready to clench into a fist of its own volition. Hermione conjured a hand mirror, gave her face a critical once-over, and applied a quick freshening charm. With that, she decided she'd calmed sufficiently to return to the Atrium and rejoin Kingsley.

She left her offices and walked briskly down the corridor to the lift. There were two people waiting for the lift to arrive, and one of them had unmistakable fiery red hair. Hermione felt her stride falter briefly, then she willed herself to keep walking. If Ginny fancied herself a sort of éminence grise, she wouldn't be making a public scene. Hermione could simply ignore her.

The wizard standing next to Ginny turned at Hermione's approach. He smiled at her, obviously recognizing her – though Hermione couldn't place his face. Ginny hadn't even acknowledged her presence, which didn't surprise her greatly. She took one more step – and time suddenly slowed to an absurd crawl, as Hermione abruptly realized...

... that Ginny was staring vacantly ahead, unresponsive...

... that the unknown wizard had pointed his wand at Hermione...

... that Hermione wouldn't be able to draw her own wand in time...

... that the wizard said something, too softly for Hermione to hear, but she could read lips well enough...

"Oblivate."

XXIV: Taking Initiative

Even as Hermione drew her wand, she knew it would be too late: there was no time to erect a Shield before the intruder's Obliviation spell struck her. Nonetheless, she attempted to hurl a fast Stunner at her opponent, in the hopes that, once begun, the Stunner would fire even after her mind had been blanked.

Except that her mind didn't blank!

There were times to stop and analyze, and there were times to simply act. The middle of a magical combat situation qualified as the latter. "Stupefy!" Hermione cast, now running at full tilt towards the intruder.

Astonishment flashed on the stranger's face, a twisted snarl replacing the smile of a moment earlier. A skilled flick of his wand parried Hermione's Stunner. He seized Ginny, still vacantly staring, and roughly shoved her into Hermione as she came near. Hermione caught Ginny by the shoulders and thrust her aside, as the wizard brought his wand back up. "Caedero!" he hissed.

"Protego!" Hermione responded, deflecting the attack. Hacking Hex, she thought wildly, nasty...

The wizard was bolting down the corridor, away from the lifts, towards the emergency stairs. He continued to throw curses behind him as he ran, forcing Hermione to maintain her defenses. She pushed herself to run faster... if she couldn't bind him magically, she'd tackle him physically. She still didn't recognize the wizard, but she now knew what he must be – and she wanted him captured, alive.

The commotion was starting to draw attention: a few fellow Ministry employees were emerging from office doorways. The intruding wizard grimaced, then thrust his hand into his pocket and brought out a glass bottle. He hurled it to the floor as Hermione came within grabbing distance of him.

And the corridor promptly plunged into pitch blackness.

Hermione stumbled, tried to maintain pursuit, and with a jarring thud ran headlong into the corridor wall. She remembered this darkness

now, from her sixth year at Hogwarts, and knew its cause: Peruvian Darkness Powder. The Ministry had since banned its importation, but evidently the wizarding criminal element still had a few remaining stockpiles.

Fortunately, she knew the proper counter-spell. "Zephyrus!" she cried, and a breeze immediately sprang from nowhere to clear away the darkness. Unfortunately, in her few seconds of blindness, the assailant had made his escape: he was nowhere to be seen.

Co-workers were beginning to approach her, inquiries on their lips, but Hermione had no time to spare for them. She rushed back to the lifts, where Ginny sat dazed on the floor. Hermione examined her, carefully but quickly: she didn't seem physically harmed, but the vacant stare hadn't left her face.

Right, then. And Dennis doesn't have a Floo connection available. Dammit, I didn't want to advertise this ability, but... Hermione formed a terse message in her mind: "Send Peasegood at once." Then with a flick of her wand and a quiet "Expecto Patronum," her Patronus-messenger sped away in a blur of silver.

Message sent, she turned her attention to the gathering Ministry employees – including, she was glad to see, several Aurors. "I'm declaring the Ministry to be in emergency lockdown, as of now. I want the entire building sealed: all communications suspended, and no one leaves without my authorization!" She pointed to each Auror in turn as she continued, "Floos disconnected, Portkeys disabled, Anti-Apparition protocols activated, stat. Montagu, go to the Atrium and inform Head Robards – he'll want to organize a floor-by-floor search. Until then, everyone is to remain where they are. Any questions?"

No one questioned her.

It had seemed like the usual lot of mail owls that morning – Weasley's Wizarding Wheezes did a huge amount of mail-order, after all – and there were the usual letters, solicitations, and bills for George to deal with. It was rare enough for Ron to receive mail at all, much less mail addressed to him care of the Wheezes.

So the envelope, with his name prominently inscribed, caught his attention at once. He paused in sorting the mail, turning it over and

looking at both sides of the envelope. Then, with a shrug, he opened it at once and drew out a single sheet of parchment.

A short letter... no, more like a note. Ron glanced quickly at the bottom: the note was unsigned. Oh, lovely, I've started getting anonymous mail. Like that stuff Muggles get, spem. He was about to crumple the parchment up and bin it when one word on the note jumped out to his eye:

Ginny's name.

Someone wants to meet with me, regarding Ginny's "welfare and safety". Wants to meet with me this morning, at the Ministry... with me? He looked again at the envelope: yes, it was addressed to him, not to his father (who, after all, worked at the Ministry), and not to George.

It might have been the last point that caused Ron to set aside caution. The mysterious correspondent was appealing to him, not his wealthy brother. And if Ginny was involved with something dodgy – which included Zabini, in Ron's estimation – then at the very least he needed to find out what it was. Then, perhaps, once he determined how best to help his sister, he could bring the rest of the family into the affair.

He made his decision. "Felicia," he called as he stuffed the note into his pocket, "can you finish sorting the owl mail? I need to run an errand, be gone only a minute." He didn't wait to hear any kind of reply, merely setting off down Diagon Alley towards the spot designated for Disapparation.

The common room of the elves' guest quarters was cramped, to be sure – Harry had to remove his Stealth Cloak, since he kept misjudging where he was stretching his invisible limbs, and knocking items off tables – but as long as he sat cross-legged on the floor, he was comfortable enough. He resisted Canby's repeated offers to raise the ceiling for him, suspecting it wouldn't go unnoticed elsewhere in the Ministry.

But in consequence, he found himself at eye level with the Ministry elf, as they debated on the best way to enter the Death Chamber in the Department of Mysteries – which, Harry discovered, put him at a bit of a disadvantage. "No," he reiterated yet again, "I don't want you

risking your neck to try to appear inside the Chamber. Not unless we know for a fact that Mysterious elves have been in that room."

"It would be no risk," Canby insisted. "If elves can't appear in the Chamber, Canby's attempt will fail. If the attempt succeeds, Canby will fetch Mister Harry and bring him into the Chamber."

Harry sighed. How he wished he could simply forbid Canby to risk his life. The last thing I need is another death on my conscience. I still remember poor Dobby... But Canby wasn't Harry's to command – even though Harry probably could, by capitalizing on his mythic status among elves. He sighed again and ceded the point. "Fine... but only if all else fails," he emphasized.

"Then how else shall we try?" Canby asked.

"Hm. Find a spot away from the door to the Chamber, and drill a tiny hole in the wall?" offered Harry. "Where no one will notice... say, behind a tapestry or something? If it works and I can get through the wall, then I make a big hole. That's the part where you distract the Unspeakables."

"Could perhaps get into an argument with Mysterious elves," Canby mused. "A very, very loud argument..."

"If they're anything like Unspeakables, you probably can't get a rise out of them."

Canby waved off the suggestion. "Oh, they are so sure they are better than other elves... Canby can always point to spots of dirt they missed cleaning." His sudden, wicked grin was worthy of Fred or George at their finest, or rather, their worst. "Even if Canby must supply dirt himself..." He stopped speaking abruptly, jerked upright as though jabbed with a pin.

"What's wrong, Canby?" Harry asked in concern, as Canby tilted his head and spread his bat-like ears as though listening.

"Emergency lockdown of the Ministry," Canby reported after a moment. "Everyone to be staying in their rooms while Aurors search." Seeing the sudden alarm on Harry's face, Canby hastened to add, "They will not be searching elves' quarters, Mister Harry!"

Looking for a... a wizard, they are. Wizards do not find their way to elves' quarters."

I could, now that I've been here, thought Harry. He kept the thought to himself, while he brought up a more immediate objection. "But what if they ask an elf to search the elves' quarters?"

"Then Canby will volunteer to be searcher," the elf said simply. "Please stay here and be safe, Mister Harry. Canby must go to Miss Hermione now." Canby gave Harry a reassuring pat on the shoulder, and vanished with a loud pop of air.

Resigning himself to waiting, Harry looked around the common room. Had he ever given the matter any thought, he supposed elves' private rooms would be decorated in some bizarrely eclectic mix of hues, styles, and gimcracks... rather like Dobby's wardrobe. Instead, the common room was minimalist, almost Spartan, in its décor: muted earth tones, side tables with flower vases, and a frame on one wall containing an abstract splash of black and white. Doors led to other rooms, presumably the guests' bedrooms; Harry didn't see a door that looked like an exit, though. After a moment's thought, he realized that house elves wouldn't need an exit door.

He felt a tentative touch at his elbow. Turning his head, Harry found himself face-to-face with the female elf he'd met at Enthalpy House. She was shyly (nervously?) offering him a goblet of pumpkin juice. Harry reached out to accept the goblet, and noticed how the elf had to control her flinch. She's scared, he was shocked to realize, scared of me. Scared that I might touch her.

Quickly recovering, Harry gave her a friendly smile, hoping to allay her fears. "Hello. You're, um, Canby's friend, right? Brillaig?"

She went from timid to delighted in a heartbeat. "You – you are remembering Brillaig!" She looked over Harry's shoulder and raised her voice. "Brillaig told you he would remember!" Harry followed her gaze to see five other elves cautiously emerging from their "dorm rooms": all female, and all staring at him with various mixes of fascination and reserve. They wore neither the tea-towels Harry associated with Winky (the only other female elf he'd really known), nor the sleeveless tabard Canby favored. Instead, they wore short-sleeved, knee-length shifts, white and unadorned – but fitting well enough to make clear that the elves were, without question, female.

These are the elves that were going to testify against Swivingham. His, um, his "working elves". No wonder they're nervous about a man invading their private rooms. Harry glanced back at Brillig. "Are introductions in order?" he asked her softly.

Brillig met the other elves' eyes, and seemed to gather consensus. "These are Briony," she said, with a gesture at the first elf, and continuing, "Chalice, Whimsy, Fatima, and Sylph." Each one bobbed her head as her name was given. Harry smiled more warmly and nodded in return to each, but made no overt movement towards them. Which seemed to reassure them, a little: Sylph and Chalice took a shy step closer.

"Those are nice names," he told them. "Mine's Harry – I'm pleased to meet you."

"You are great Dobby's friend Harry Potter," Sylph clarified.

"Er, yes," said Harry, still trying to put them at their ease. "And I count myself very lucky to have had Dobby as a friend. Dobby was a... a noble elf, in so many ways."

Half of them were quickly losing their reserve, their fascination for the Defender of House-Elves growing stronger. Briony, however, seemed inclined to take exception to Harry's last comment. "Dobby? Dobby was... was a free elf," she said, somehow making the term sound unclean.

"He was," Harry agreed. "Dobby wasn't afraid of hard work." He saw that he'd dumbfounded Briony, and pressed his point. "Good elves don't mind hard work, do they? Well, freedom is very hard work. Easy to let someone else tell you what to do, all day, every day – but hard to have to think, to choose, to take responsibility. I know humans find it hard work, so I imagine elves find it hard work, too. It takes a very special kind of person to be free." He paused, seeing Dobby in his mind, recalling his fierce insistence on doing the right thing, no matter how it might hurt... and Harry smiled fondly. "That was Dobby, all right."

To his other side, Brillig drew in a deep, fervent breath. If Harry had looked at her just then, he might have been disconcerted to see the nearly worshipful expression on her face... and uncomfortably

reminded of Hermione's analogy with Jesus and the nuns. But at the moment, his attention was drawn to the one elf who was still holding back from him: Fatima, who looked so much like the servant-elf with the Arab Cartel Lord in the Pensieve.

Hermione was sure this Fatima had some connection to the Cartel, once. If I can just get her engaged in the discussion...

"Freedom... well, once you have freedom, you want all those close to you to have it, too." Harry paused to gulp his pumpkin juice, then set the goblet on the nearby table. "I don't think Dobby had any family," he went on. "I think he'd have told me if he had children, or brothers, or anything. But if he did, I think – I know – that Dobby would have wanted them to be as free as he was."

Oh, that got her notice.

"I guess I don't know much about elf families," he concluded ruefully. "It's stupid of me, I know... I'm sorry..." He looked around the room in invitation.

Brillig took over her role as spokeshelf for the group. "Elves is having brothers and sisters, of course, Mister Harry," she told him. "Elves is certainly having children – how else is there being more elves?" There was a general giggle at that. Brillig sobered quickly as she went on, "If elves is lucky, elves is having mates for life."

"If elves is not lucky," Fatima put in abruptly, harshly, "elves is never having mates, only having breeders. Masters is telling elves when to breed, and with whom."

Harry nodded. "Like your former master, Jack Swivingham." As the elves nodded in return, his eyes fixed on Fatima. "And like your master before Swivingham."

Fatima maintained her harsh expression. She said nothing.

"Your sister's current master," Harry finished gently. It was a shot in the dark, but Harry felt sure of his ground.

And the shot struck home. Fatima's stark façade crumbled in astonishment. "Mister Harry Potter knows about Ayesha?" she cried piteously.

"I know some things about some things," Harry hedged. "I know she still waits on him, bringing his food and drink." Fatima's eyes widened, and he felt confident enough to add, "And he's, er, 'training' her... the way he 'trained' you?"

The misery on her face showed Harry he was right – and it was more than he could bear. He quickly turned to Brillig. "See, that's just not right," he said earnestly. "Human, or elf, or any being whatever, that's not right. No one should be able to tell us where we may love, or deny it from us. Love is too precious."

He'd started to turn back to Fatima, wanting to draw her out further, when he felt tiny fingers dig into his bicep. Brillig had fallen to her knees, wrapped her arms around Harry's arm, and was hugging it to her bosom with an iron grip. "Oh, yes, Mister Harry," she sighed in ecstasy. It might have been religious ecstasy...

Harry managed to move his free arm in time to prevent Sylph from seizing it in a similar grip. He wanted at least one hand for gesturing, to drive his point home – and gain Fatima's cooperation. "It's not right," he repeated. "If we can find Ayesha, there's a chance we can free her from..." He let the sentence dangle, hoping Fatima would respond.

"From ibn al-Afrif?" Fatima finished doubtfully. "He is being a hard master, he will never..."

"She will never be free if we don't try," Harry persisted. "We have to try. I promise you I will try, if you will help." He saw her starting to waver: he caught her eye, and held it. "You have my word, Fatima."

Sylph squealed excitedly, and this time she succeeded in capturing Harry's other arm above the elbow. Fatima still kept her distance, undecided. Harry managed to extend his lower arm – Sylph didn't loosen her grip, but didn't try to stop him, either – and reach out his hand to Fatima. In supplication.

Fatima hesitated one more moment. Her mouth tightened – and she stepped forward and took Harry's hand. In agreement.

Chalice and Whimsy crowded around them in excitement. From behind Fatima, Briony cheered her friend. Thus surrounded and held,

Harry was acutely aware of the elves' proximity – and, embarrassingly, of their attractive forms. Really, except for the ears, and skin tone – and the fact they were a meter tall – they looked very much like seventh-year female students at Hogwarts. They even had hair!

Like students at Hogwarts.

Taught by professors at Hogwarts.

And that thought was followed by an idea so incendiary, yet so filled with potential, that Harry was almost glad Canby chose that exact moment to reappear in the common room, bringing Hermione with him.

"Harry! What in Merlin's name are you doing?"

"Um..."

"Mister Harry Potter is promising to help the elves again!" cried Brillig happily.

"Well, one in particular," Harry said hastily, forestalling elven imaginations from running rampant. "I promised Fatima we'd try to free her sister Ayesha – you remember seeing her sister? – from her current master, ibn al-Afrif." Harry delivered the last words with only a slight emphasis, but Hermione immediately picked up on their significance.

They now had the name of a second Cartel Lord – and judging from Ginny's Pensieve memory, the most influential.

"If ibn al-Afrif is convicted of crimes," Hermione slowly said, as she sat down on the floor next to Harry, "and house-elves were victimized in the commission of those crimes... yes, I should think the Ministries, or the ICW, would guarantee their freedom."

"Thank you, Hermione," Harry began, then broke off. His eyes had focused on Hermione's face. Suddenly oblivious to the elves around him, he shook Brillig and Sylph off his arms and leaned towards Hermione. His fingers came up to not-quite-touch her cheek, where

a mottled bruise was darkening. "Where'd this come from? Hermione, what happened?"

"Oh..." Hermione brought her own hand to her cheek, and winced as she felt how extensive the bruise was becoming. "There's been some unpleasantness."

"Miss Hermione was attacked," Canby told Harry, with a reproachful look for Hermione. "It is why the Ministry is in emergency lockdown now."

"Ginny was attacked first," Hermione said quickly, before Harry could storm out of the elves' quarters in anger. "Obliviated. I happened along at the wrong time, and was nearly Obliviated as well. When that didn't work, he tried a more direct approach."

"You're all right, though? I mean, you weren't hurt, or, or...?"

"No, I defended myself quite creditably, thank you. Except for his first attack on me, when he tried to Obliviate me – that one I only avoided thanks to my birthday gift." She fingered the sapphire where it lay beneath her robes, so that he could see its outline. "I didn't even remember it was there until later, actually – my reflexes took over."

"Then how...?" He gestured again at her bruised face.

"He used Peruvian Darkness Powder to escape," Hermione said in disgust, "and I ran into a wall." Her irritated glare said that Harry laughed at his own peril.

The Master of the Deathly Hallows had long since learned to recognize danger when it confronted him. He didn't so much as crack a smile. "Oh," he deadpanned.

She waited a moment, until she was satisfied he wouldn't take the mickey... then turned away and relaxed slightly. "Anyway..."

"Try not to do that," he added, still deadpan, his timing perfect.

She whirled to glare at him again, but he brought up his left hand to her face. There was a brief glow, as the Elder Wand did its work, and her injury was healed. "I mean, the gem only wards spells... it

doesn't make you invulnerable. You can still be physically hurt." He lowered his hand and regarded her tenderly. "Try not to do that," he said again, but this time without a trace of mockery.

It was impossible for Hermione to maintain her glare after that, though she certainly tried. "Anyway," she pressed on, "the Ministry's in an uproar, and I thought I should see you while I could, inform you what's happening." He nodded, ready to listen. She continued, "Ginny's more or less recovered from the attack. I brought Peasegood back to see her: he says the attacker was trying to edit a specific memory, but I interrupted him and his Memory Charm went awry. As a result, Ginny's lost about a week's worth of memory."

"Friday's Fire Party," winced Harry, "seeing the Lords."

"And everything since," Hermione bit off, and for once didn't elaborate. Judging from her curt tone, Harry wondered if he dared ask further. When Hermione remained silent, he prudently decided to do the same.

"We still have her Pensieve memory," she continued more calmly after a moment, "but I doubt she had a chance to tell Zabini about it, else she wouldn't have been Obliviated. And Zabini... well, I know he's an actor of the first water, but I'd swear he's genuinely upset about Ginny's attack today."

"We need to keep in mind that Zabini's not a member of this Cartel," Harry said slowly, thinking aloud. "It's as you said a couple of days ago, he works with them, not for them. The Cartel Lords want anonymity – they're the ones who prefer Obliviation. It was Zabini who went for the kill – and only the one time. It had the feel of a... a loyalty test..."

"So today's attacker was from the Cartel... erasing memory, erasing evidence. Robards, Ginny... although how did they know Ginny would be at the Ministry today? She must have told Zabini she was meeting him here, and he told the Cartel..."

"Or else Ginny wasn't their primary target today. You were." Harry scowled at the thought that Hermione was still at risk. "Who was the attacker? Have the Aurors caught him yet?"

"Not yet, they're still searching. I couldn't identify him, so he's not a Ministry worker... except he was in the Ministry already... but he could have been Polyjuiced... Damn. Too many possibilities." She chewed on her lower lip, lost in thought.

"Did he say anything?" asked Harry. "Er, besides spells? I mean, one obvious source of strangers at the Ministry is..."

"... is today's International Conference," Hermione said in unison with him, which caused her to smile for the first time. "I considered that. But no, he only spoke incantations, and I didn't notice any particular accent. But then, I wasn't paying attention to that." She cocked an eyebrow at Sylph, who was trying to re-bond with Harry's arm, and said sweetly, "Rear of the queue, please." Once the abashed elf had relinquished her spot next to Harry, Hermione slid beside him and wrapped her arm around his waist.

She was very pleased that his arm had found its way around her waist in response.

"The Aurors have my description of the assailant," Hermione continued. "They'll search every floor, room by room, until they find him. Which is why, during lockdown, everyone stays in whatever room they're in." She snorted. "Obviously, all the delegates and their staffs are being kept in the meeting room on the Atrium level, until this is sorted out. And again obviously, the opening session of the Conference has been delayed. It gives my team with Lovinett a little more time to break through his Occlumency – get the evidence we need to stop Zabini."

"You're going to be pissing off some fairly high-powered people," noted Harry. "Foreign and domestic. The sort of people that don't appreciate being inconvenienced just so Aurors can do their jobs. They could make your job difficult, down the road." He smirked as Hermione formed an indignant reply. "And you don't much care," he added in approval. "I know."

She squeezed him tighter and leaned into him, resting her head on his shoulder... heedless of the mixed looks she was receiving from the elves. They shared a quiet moment together: they both knew, somehow, it would be their last for some time to come.

"I need to return to the Conference very soon, before they miss me," she said at length. "As you say, if I'm going to inconvenience a room full of delegates, I'd better be there for the show. If only to remind them why they've convened in the first place."

He nodded. "And y'know, if everyone's confined to their offices, this is a perfect time for me to try to break into the Death Chamber again. Less chance I'll be noticed, eh?" Getting to his knees, he retrieved the Stealth Cloak from where he'd put it after earlier removing it, and began to drape it over his shoulders.

"If Mister Harry will wait," said Canby, stepping towards Hermione, "Canby will take Miss Hermione to the Atrium, then come back for him..."

"No need," Harry interrupted. "I've been to the Department of Mysteries once – I can find my way there again. Take care of Hermione first, please, Canby... then join me when you can. We'll try some of our ideas together." He settled the Cloak into place and vanished from view; the faint puff of his Disapparation was almost anti-climactic.

Canby sighed and shook his head. "Mister Harry is very much like house-elves, isn't he, Miss Hermione?"

"Mm hmm, in some ways," Hermione said, but her mind was elsewhere. She had to admit, she was loath to go back to the Conference and confront Zabini – without having something in hand she could use to stop him! Oh, if worst came to worst, she'd show Ginny's memory to the assembled delegates, but it wasn't enough: at most, it might associate Zabini with Swivingham's death, and that weakly. The memory didn't even prove that the three wizards were the Cartel Lords, let alone that Zabini was working hand-in-glove with the Cartel.

Even Lovinett, if he testified, could only show Zabini ordered Swivingham's death – I'd lay odds Zabini never told Lovinett about the Cartel. Though Lovinett's sequestered memories do suggest the Cartel's Obliviator paid him a visit... Face it, Hermione, the only people who can show Zabini's connection to the Cartel Lords are either dead or Obliviated.

She paused. Or have no incentive to say anything. Yet.

Perhaps, just perhaps... I can give them one.

Canby was at her elbow, ready to leave. "One moment, Canby," Hermione said slowly, considering an idea. She turned and addressed the female elves. "You six were prepared to testify against Jack Swivingham... because it was the right thing to do. Are you still prepared to do the right thing?"

Hesitantly, wondering where The Witch Who Won was leading, they nodded.

"And more to the point, will you help us free Ayesha, as Fatima asked, so they can be together again? And not have to work... like that... any more, ever?"

More enthusiastic nods this time, and Brilla took Fatima's hand in encouragement.

"Then I need your help," Hermione said firmly. She stretched her arms out, as though to bring the elves together into a conspiracy, and they didn't hesitate to gather around her.

XXV: In Zugzwang

Ron Weasley was growing less happy by the minute. Almost the very moment he'd arrived at the Ministry, he'd been herded into a large room filled with people in an uproar. He was told, by the Auror who'd marched him in, that he could either stay there or be Stunned, his choice. He was told his stay would be indefinite. He was told, in no uncertain terms, that he couldn't send a message back to the shop, to tell Felicia his "errand" had been extended, and ask her to cover for him with George.

What he wasn't being told was why.

The room, at least, had a coffee and tea service laid out. Presumably, for the people who were already here... foreigners, most of them, to hear them talk. Ron did recognize two of them from photos in the Daily Prophet, years ago: members of the International Confederation of Wizards, back when they'd had to replace Dumbledore. Shaking his head, Ron took his coffee and a hastily-snagged pastry and retreated to a chair in the farthest corner of the room.

What am I even doing here? he wondered. Stuffing the pastry into his mouth, he reached into his pocket and brought out the note he'd received earlier that morning. He read it over again. Ginny's 'welfare and safety', huh? I guess I'm not the only one to be worried – not that I really much care what Little Miss Blabbermouth is up to now. I wonder who it is – and what they know.

He spotted Blaise Zabini across the room, talking to Kingsley Shacklebolt. Could this have something to do with Ginny and Zabini? I tried to tell her he was no good for her. Or... could Zabini have sent the note? Naw, he'd have signed it...

Ron had a good mind to walk right up to Zabini and tell him to stay away from his sister. But he had wit enough to know that, first, it would make him look like a school boy, and second, it might even prove counter-productive. Oh, and that it was none of his business, that too.

Still, Ron kept his eyes glued on Zabini as he separated from Shacklebolt and circulated about the room, not trusting the berk an inch. It gave Ron something to do, as he waited to be let out of this

room so he could keep his appointment with the mystery note-sender.

The corridors of the Department of Mysteries were deserted, with the Unspeakables confined to their offices (or, some of them, in the Atrium conference hall). Eldritch's strange monitoring device was still in front of the open-but-impassible door to the Death Chamber, and Harry gave it wide berth. There were no tapestries or portraits on this section of the corridor wall, unfortunately, but there was a floor-to-ceiling bookcase, which would hide Harry's activities very nicely.

A Silencio on the bookcase first, to keep any sound from echoing down the corridor... then Mobilibancus lifted the bookcase slightly and shifted one end away from the wall. Harry waited until there was room for him behind the case, then lowered it gently to the floor. With the Elder Wand in hand, he squeezed behind the shelves and placed the Wand's tip against the stone wall that separated him from the Chamber.

"Foro," he murmured. A beam of blue light began to drill a neat quarter-inch hole into the stone.

He had to stop at one point, to blow dust out of the hole – which necessitated removing the Cloak from his face. He was just about to replace the Cloak and continue drilling when Canby appeared by his side. "Progress, sir?" he whispered. Harry was pleased the elf had the forethought not to say his name aloud.

"Almost through, I think," Harry whispered back. He aimed the Wand back into the hole and reapplied Foro again. After another minute, he withdrew the wand and again blew dust from the hole. "I think that did it," he told Canby. "Let's try it." He inserted the Wand's tip into the hole. "Reducto!"

The Wand shot out of the hole like an arrow, expelled by the sudden discharge of energy. Only Harry's superb reflexes allowed him to snatch the Wand in mid-flight before it could clatter against the back of the bookcase, or fall to the floor. He could feel the shockwave of magic crawl prickling across his skin, just as it had the first time he'd tried breaking through the barrier; judging from the way Canby's ears stood erect, he'd felt the shock too.

"It isn't working?" Canby asked.

"No. The barrier seems to be everywhere in the room – flat against all the walls, apparently. Bleeding crap!" Harry rubbed one eye wearily.

"Then... then there is no help for it," Canby said slowly. "Canby must see if he can enter the Chamber."

"Wait a mo." Leaving his face uncovered – a necessary risk for the moment – Harry stepped back from behind the bookcase. Canby immediately moved it back into place, covering the new hole in the wall, as Harry stepped to the door that led into the Chamber. He gently moved the monitor apparatus to one side, so that it no longer blocked the doorway, and with a quiet "Finite Incantatem" assured that it wouldn't record what they were about to do.

"I don't suppose there's any way I can talk you out of this?" he asked resignedly. Solemnly Canby shook his head. "Right, then," Harry went on, "I'm going to Silence you so that we don't attract attention. Then I want you to try to appear in the Chamber right here, right in front of the door, so that if it looks like you're hurt I can Accio you straight out of there. I hope."

"With luck, it won't be needed," said Canby. Turning to face the door, he waited until Harry had applied the Silencing Charm. Then he closed his eyes and squinched up his face in concentration.

Two things happened in rapid succession. Canby vanished and reappeared just inside the doorway – and in the next instant, he was propelled forcefully out the door as though shot from a cannon. He collided with Harry and the two tumbled to the floor in a jangle of limbs.

"What was that?" Harry asked when he could catch his breath. He quickly cancelled the Silencing Charm to hear Canby's reply.

"Canby... Canby isn't sure," replied the elf, obviously confused. "It felt like... like Canby was being blown from the Chamber." He looked wide-eyed at the door, then back at Harry. "It is not a barrier, Canby thinks. It is a... a coldness... filling the Chamber! Pushing out everything like a strong wind."

"Uh huh. So it is keeping things out, and not in." Harry stood and stepped to the Chamber door. Experimentally, he extended his hand: as before, it was stopped, blocked from entering. And as before, it didn't feel solid, as an invisible wall might: his hand simply would go no further. It didn't feel like a rushing wind of any sort... but then, on this side of the doorway, there was no reason it should.

Through the door he could see the Arch, with its mysterious Veil fluttering gently. It had done so when Harry had visited the Chamber the night Sirius died, fluttering as though in a slight breeze, though the air in the Chamber had felt deathly still. He supposed it might still flutter gently, even if a mighty wind were somehow being sent through the Arch from beyond.

Why are you keeping everyone out? he silently asked the Arch. Why are you keeping me out? It's not as though I plan to hurt you, I only want to get rid of the Deathly Hallows. I'm only Master of the Deathly Hallows because I don't have any other choice...

His gaze fixed on the runes graven across the Arch... runes that glowed ember-red against the black stone. Harry might have thought the runes had always been carved there, remaining unseen until they'd started glowing – but the fact that the runes had altered themselves dispelled that notion. And they were some sort of warning now, according to Hermione...

With a start, Harry leaned forward and squinted to sharpen his vision. Hadn't Hermione said there were gaps in the runes now? He couldn't see any gaps in the gravings on the Arch. Either the runes had altered themselves yet again, or... "Canby," he said softly, "come look at the Arch. Look at the runes. Can you read them?"

Canby trotted to Harry's side and peered at the Arch. "Canby cannot read the runes, sir," he replied, equally softly.

"Do they cover the entire Arch?"

"No, sir. There is... gaps."

So I can see runes that no one else can see. Well, that's just splendid. Now if only I could read the damned things, we'd be making progress!

Harry hadn't studied Ancient Runes, as Hermione had; he knew runes existed, and that was about the extent of his knowledge. But he had a Seeker's eye for detail, and he used it now to compare the runes on the Arch with what he remembered on the parchment Hermione had shown him. Amidst all the other runes were two new ones, which he didn't recall from the parchment – runes repeated several times, runes he now suspected filled the gaps in Hermione's copy. One symbol was shaped like a bolt of lightning; it didn't take much thought to suss out that it must refer to him. The other was a variant on the symbol for the Deathly Hallows: the bisected circle within a triangle, but the whole within a square. Or... maybe not quite within...?

He squinted more closely, then conjured a pair of opera glasses. Looking through the glasses, he could see the symbol clearly: the vertical straight line, within a circle, within a triangle – all within, or surmounted by, a square with the bottom side removed. Three lines at right angles, the three top sides of a square, drawn as though hovering over the Hallows' symbol. Or, perhaps, covering it.

A cover? A box? A container? Harry racked his brain. No, not for the Hallows – the Hallows can't be contained. What is it, then, and why is it with the Hallows' symbol?

It must symbolize something else. Like the line symbolizes the Wand, and the circle's the Stone... some other object with roughly that shape. Three-quarters of a square... two uprights and a top...

And Harry couldn't help it. He burst out laughing, so hard that he couldn't stand. It was laughter at himself, laughter at his predicament, laughter with more than a tinge of bitterness. Laughing, because the alternative was crying.

He sat heavily on the floor and covered his mouth to suppress his laughter. Canby looked at him in astonishment, but Harry couldn't explain without giving away his secret. But oh, how he wished Hermione were there with him to share his discovery.

All these years, I've been calling myself the Master of the Deathly Hallows. I should have known that couldn't be the truth.

I'm only Master of three of them.

From his corner, Ron noticed various people's reactions when two wizards slipped into the conference room, one wearing the blue robes of an Auror: Concern, fear, expectation. The new arrivals went straight to Shacklebolt and Robards, and Zabini made a beeline for the group. They shared low murmurings for a minute or so.

"A week?" Zabini had made no effort to lower his voice. He stared at the Spell Reversal specialist, who fell silent. By voice, by expression, by every sign Zabini seemed aghast and outraged.

"Don't sound so shocked, Zabini," growled Robards. "This is exactly the sort of attack we called this Conference to counter." He addressed the Auror who had accompanied the Spell Reversal specialist. "Any word on the search, Montagu?"

The Auror shook his head. "We're working our way down, floor by floor, sir. I've two agents in the stairwells, and three watching the Floo fireplaces and Apparation point. Oh, and the phone booth entrance."

"We convened this Conference," Zabini told Robards with icy courtesy, "so that the national Ministries might pool our resources to address the rise in international crime. Smuggling, even drug trafficking. But this – this unwarranted assault on an innocent bystander could be no part of our brief!"

"Why not? The attack on Miss Weasley was no different than my own attack!" Robards smiled thinly. "Oh, hadn't you heard? I was Obliviated on Sunday night, in the sanctity of my own home. We have proof of the attack, though of course I haven't yet recovered the stolen memories."

"Wait a minute!" Ron interrupted, suddenly realizing what they were saying. He bounded from his corner and marched up to the group, as the assembled delegates watched with growing interest. "You never said it was Ginny who was attacked! Is she hurt? Where's she? What happened?"

"She was Obliviated, Mr. Weasley," Shacklebolt said, "right here inside the Ministry. She's lost," he glanced at the Spell Reversal specialist for confirmation, "about a week's worth of memories, but she's physically unhurt."

"We will find the culprit," put in Robards.

"See that you do," said Zabini in a low voice. "And I'll want to go to see her as soon as possible."

"Fine. Right after I do," put in Ron savagely.

Zabini didn't reply directly, but his glance at Ron clearly said the redhead wasn't worth his time. He dismissed Ron and turned back to Robards. "I know the last few days have been trying for you, Gawain... but still, I'm not sure I understand how your Department could have grown so lax as to allow this attack in the first place. But it seems quite clear that it could have nothing to do with your own attack – or the purpose of this Conference."

"Oh, now, Zabini," came a new voice at the door, "don't sell yourself short. I feel sure you understand everything perfectly well." Hermione Granger-Weasley strode confidently into the hall, a Magical Law Enforcer behind her. At her nod, he closed the door and stood in front of it, arms crossed.

Hermione was, in fact, much less confident than she looked. She knew that diligent work, by her and Creevey and others, might well produce solid evidence – given time. But it might not. And in that time, Zabini would have consolidated his political influence further... while the Cartel Lords would have taken their own steps to protect themselves. If Hermione was to keep the initiative, she had to act now.

But her only course of action carried considerable risk, should it fail.

Zabini was about to reply, but Ron spoke first. "Hermione? What's this about?"

She frowned slightly and shook her head, as if the signal Not now, Ron was a conditioned reflex, before his presence fully registered. "Ron? What are you doing here?"

"I came to talk to someone about Ginny," here Ron dug the note from his pocket as he spoke, "something about her welfare and safety, and it looks like I was right to worry! Is it about... well, you know what..." He offered the note to Hermione.

She barely succeeded in hiding her astonishment that Ron hadn't understood the implications of that note – fortunately, her expression was still one of being slightly put out, which helped. Mechanically she accepted the note, but her attention wasn't on it, or Ron. Instead, Hermione kept one surreptitious eye on Zabini, while the other was monitoring the room, waiting to see who would react to her possession of this message...

There! Upon seeing the note, one of the wizards from the Greek delegation had given a tiny start, then begun to turn, taking a step behind one of his colleagues – not moving fast enough to attract attention, but enough to obscure Hermione's view of him. She pointed a finger at him. "Halt!"

His colleague promptly moving out of the way, the wizard straightened and raised his hands slightly in a gesture of cooperation. Zabini, meanwhile, had showed no reaction to Ron's note... which, given it was Zabini, meant nothing.

Hermione approached the wizard with an outward show of calm, not drawing her wand, knowing that Robards, Montagu, and the Enforcer at the door were covering her back. "And you are?"

"Sabas Doukas," he replied quietly, "clerk for our deputation." His face was completely different from that of the wizard who'd attacked her and Ginny. But a dose of Polyjuice Potion would make facial features irrelevant. More important was the fact that he was the same height and build as the attacker – and Hermione knew that Aurors using Polyjuice always tried to find a form close to their own build, so that their trained responses weren't thrown off-balance by a body of unfamiliar size or weight.

She held out her hand. "May we examine your wand, please." Phrased as a request, her tone made it a order.

Doukas 's eyes slid around the room, noting the interest of all the delegates – but more importantly, of the Aurors. Slowly, making no sudden movements, he reached into his pocket. After a moment, an expression of surprise filled his face. "I... I appear to have lost it."

Hermione nodded. "As I expected. Oh, it must have been a wrench for you to throw it away: I know how attached we grow to our wands, they did choose us after all." She turned and stepped backward so

that she could address Shacklebolt and Robards, while still keeping Doukas in her field of view. "I've no doubt that we'll find his wand in the stairwell. And that Prior Incantatem on it will yield a positive result for Memory Charms. And that Doukas will claim it was another wizard who used his wand to attack me and Ginny."

"I do claim that!" Doukas said, with more force.

"In that case," replied Hermione cordially, drawing an empty ampule from her pocket, "you won't mind if I take a small sample of your blood?"

He stared at the ampule, motionless, mute, expressionless. Hermione felt a qualm of doubt... which she covered, as she frequently did, by talking.

"The Aurors will continue searching, of course," she said didactically, "but I came here, to the international delegates. I was certain the culprit would be here amongst them." She looked around the room at the assembled witches and wizards, some of whom were beginning to swell indignant at her words, and raised a finger as though lecturing. "The culprit used Peruvian Darkness Powder to escape. That's been banned in Britain... but it's still available in other countries. Reasonable that the wizard who used it brought it here from one of those countries. The Slavic states, for instance." She fixed her gaze back on Doukas. "You are Macedonian, are you not?"

"All very interesting, Madam Granger," put in Zabini, who seemed to have regained his sang froid, "but very circumstantial. As is the wand... even if it were his, well, as you yourself note, these aren't proof."

"Taken separately, I agree. And even if his blood tests positive for Polyjuice, that's still not proof." She gave Zabini the frosty half-smile for which all the upper levels of the Ministry had learned a healthy respect. "But cumulatively, it would be evidence sufficient to hold Doukas for questioning... under Veritaserum. And then, I suspect, proof will come readily." She turned back to Doukas. "Your blood. I won't ask again."

His lips curled in a twisted snarl; Hermione recognized the expression – and in that instant, knew she'd found her attacker.

Doukas lunged towards Hermione. But she'd anticipated this – she sidestepped, one hand guiding his body away and down while her foot stay in place to trip him. He started to tumble, turned the tumble into a well-practiced roll, and came out of the roll immediately back to his feet – with a knife in his hand.

The roll had taken him some distance from Hermione, and towards the door. Doukas instantly made for the nearest person between him and the door: Ron. The flurry of action had taken Ron by surprise; before he could react, he found himself held from behind, one arm twisted behind his back and the knife at his throat.

"Let us all stay calm," announced Doukas. "I would not enjoy making Madam Granger a widow."

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